

WHEN THE HONEYMOON PHASE ENDS:
NARRATIVE PERSPECTIVES ON REINTEGRATION FOLLOWING
MILITARY DEPLOYMENT

A Thesis

Presented to the
Faculty of the College of Graduate Studies of
Angelo State University

In Partial Fulfillment of the
Requirements for the Degree
MASTER OF ARTS

by
BRITTNEY JAE MILLER

August 2016

Major: Communication

WHEN THE HONEYMOON PHASE ENDS:
NARRATIVE PERSPECTIVES ON REINTEGRATION FOLLOWING
MILITARY DEPLOYMENT

by

BRITTNEY JAE MILLER

APPROVED:

Derek M. Bolen, Ph.D.

John E. Klingemann, Ph.D.

Cody B. Scott, Ph.D.

Jeffrey B. Schonberg, Ph.D.

August 2016

APPROVED:

Dr. Susan E. Keith
Dean, College of Graduate Studies

Dedication

For all military spouses—past, present, and future.
You are important. You are stronger than you think.
Thank you for *your* service and sacrifice.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Where to begin? When I decided to come back to school and pursue a master's degree, I was about 90% positive I would never consider writing a thesis for my final project. However, the 10% prevailed, and you are about to embark on a narrative journey through the eyes of military partners in the aftermath of military deployment. Before you begin, I have several people I need to thank.

First, one thousand thank you's to my advisor, Dr. Derek Bolen. Honestly, you intimidated the hell out of me my first semester in the program with words like epistemology, paradigm, and hegemony. That intimidation, however, grew into a tremendous respect for you as a professor and as a scholar. Thank you for opening up the world of narrative to me. When I began my graduate school adventure, I had no idea my mind would be opened to entirely new and exciting forms of scholarship. Thank you for encouraging me to both share my story and access the story of others. I could not have asked for a better advisor for this thesis. Thank you for reading, and in some cases reading and re-reading, countless stories and sections, not only within this thesis but within the many other papers, and offering me meaningful and encouraging feedback. Every time I saw one of your notes in the margins of my papers, I looked forward to reading it because I knew you really read what I wrote. I couldn't wait to see what you thought! You have pushed me further than I ever dreamed of going in this program. You challenge me to think outside of my norms and view ideas from a different perspective, and I thank you for that. I am a better-rounded person, stronger student, and immensely better writer because of you.

Second, to the members of my thesis advisory committee, Drs. John Klingemann, Cody Scott, and Jeffrey Schonberg, thank you all for agreeing to sit on my committee. I

appreciate the amount of time each of you put into my thesis. Dr. Klingemann, thank you for being an advocate for your students. While we only knew each other briefly, I consider myself incredibly lucky to have worked with you. The department was fortunate to have you as an interim chair.

I would also like to thank my other professors who worked with me throughout graduate school. Dr. June Smith, thank you for taking an interest in my learning and being willing to help me grow as a student. Dr. Adria Battaglia, I loved class with you! You always facilitated discussion and encouraged healthy debates. I still stand by my statement in that Race, Gender, and Media was one of the most challenging courses for me throughout my time in the program. The department is not the same without your warmth and kindness. Dr. Flor Madero, although I only took one class with you, I thoroughly enjoyed working with you and getting to know you. You have such a sense of purpose and amazing aura about you, and I admire your strength and work ethic. Thank you for taking a genuine interest in each one of your students.

Third, to my friends and colleagues. To Dustin, Bolton, Sara, Teri, and Dre, it was wonderful to work with and learn from each of you. Some of the best conversations I had this past year and a half have been either in class or at the bar with all of you. Kelsey, I'm so glad we met each other and became friends! Thank you for being my "thesis writing buddy" and for offering words of encouragement when I was overwhelmed and stressed, or simply listening when I needed someone to talk to who would understand. To my work colleagues, thank you for all of your support, particularly in my last semester. Your kind words and encouragement meant more than you know. To Becky, thank you for being such a wonderful and considerate boss. I have so much admiration for you and what you do. I hope to grow

into my profession with the same level of professionalism, respect, and genuine care for employees as you display in our office.

A huge thank you to Cynthia, my professional mentor and friend. You brought me into the marketing field! You inspired me to go back to school and always encouraged me to be better and push harder. I cannot tell you how much I admire your drive and work ethic. You always lead by example. I hope you know you are so much more than a mentor to me, but someone I consider a friend. I will never forget everything you did for me while Caleb was away on deployment. It meant more than you will ever know. Even though we don't see each other much anymore, I appreciate you checking in and offering me solid advice. I think about you often and how much I miss our afternoons at Terra Nova Plaza. Thank you for taking a chance on me!

To all of my friends, thank you for all of your encouragement and support. There are too many of you to name, but I know how lucky I am to have each of you in my life and don't take any of our relationships for granted. Rebecca, thanks for being my best friend for well over half our lives. We have remained close through the distance, and I'm so thankful we are back in the same state again. Our lunches throughout this past year have meant more than you know. I'm so glad we were seated next to each other in seventh grade choir!

To my family, you are simply the best. Even though I've gotten older, I still seek to make all of you proud of me. Dad, thanks for checking in on me, or, as you would say, "thinking about" me. Mom, I'm so thankful for you and how our relationship has blossomed into more than a mother/daughter relationship and into a wonderful friendship. I truly appreciate all the times you listened to me vent, gave advice and encouragement, and offered a different perspective. Thanks for all the racquetball games, long walks, and fun

conversations—those moments helped me relax and refocus. And to my sister, Katie Bug. I know no one more loyal to me than you, and I hope you know that door swings both ways. There is nothing I wouldn't do for you. Thank you for always having my back and being the very best friend I could ever ask for. I love all of you so much!

Zoey, although I know you will never read this (but what a cool trick that would be!), you truly are the best dog I've ever met! If I could ever be as happy as you are with a good stick and a walk, life would be good. Thanks for adopting us at PetSmart and being the most loyal companion!

Finally, to my husband, Caleb. Mr. Miller, without you, this thesis would, quite literally, not be possible. Thank you for sharing life with me. The support you have always given me cannot be matched. You've encouraged, comforted, listened, discussed, agreed, disagreed, and have had more faith in me throughout this entire process than I have had in myself. I could not have asked for a better life partner. I will forever be grateful for the old Chick-fil-A drive thru because it brought us together. We have seen each other grow and been there for each other in several pivotal life moments, first as friends and now as partners. I am a better person because of you, and am so glad we get to embark on this journey called life together.

In the words of Clarence from *It's a Wonderful Life*, "No man [or woman] is a failure who has friends." I am where I am because of the people who surround me and have helped me along the way. To all of you, "Thanks for the wings!" You have each given me the beautiful opportunity to fly.

ABSTRACT

Being the partner of a military member comes with a unique set of challenges often not faced by civilian couples. Research within the interpersonal communication discipline is expanding to include military couples, particularly the effects of deployment on romantic military relationships. However, current research remains scant from a postmodern interpretive, narrative lens. This study seeks to illuminate a postmodern inquiry method for exploring romantic military relationships—seeking to move away from general, statistical knowledge of the military spouse community; increase understanding of the post-deployment process upon the conclusion of a deployment; and provide a potential resource for current and future military partners.

Keywords: military relationships, deployment, reintegration, narrative, communication

TABLE OF CONTENTS

DEDICATION	iii
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS	iv
ABSTRACT	viii
CHAPTER 1 INTRODUCTION	1
Summary	12
CHAPTER 2 LITERATURE REVIEW	13
Long Distance Relationships	13
Military Long Distance Relationships	16
Deployment	18
Communication	19
Support	21
Post-Deployment	22
Theoretical/Methodological Approaches	26
Postpositivism	26
Interpretivism	27
Moving toward narrative	28
Summary	29
CHAPTER 3 METHODOLOGY	31
Interactive Interviewing	32
Storying the Narratives	33
Narratives	34
Narrative truth and memory	36
Procedure	39
Participants	40
Narrating the Interviews	40
Summary	42
CHAPTER 4 NARRATIVES	44
Communicating While Apart	45
Homecoming	47
Going Home Together	53

A New Normal	58
Reintegrating as a Couple	62
Establishing a Routine	71
Hindsight.....	75
CHAPTER 5 DISCUSSION.....	78
Summary	78
Interpretations of Narratives Shared	80
Limitations of Research	84
Future Possibilities.....	87
Conclusion	88
REFERENCES	91
APPENDIXES	101
Appendix A.....	101
Appendix B	102
Appendix C	104

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

I arrive at the pier a little before sundown. I've had a bad day at work and need some time to process before I go home. Almost two weeks have passed since my partner's return from an eight month deployment. Homecoming exceeded my expectations. It couldn't have been more wonderful—but reality set back in. While I expected there to be some frustration due to my complete lack of timely adaptability to new routines, this is much harder than I imagined. For eight months, I counted down the months, then weeks, then days to when he would be home. Yet, right now, barely two weeks later, I choose to drive out to the pier to process my day instead of going home.

I know what triggers it.

Aside from my boss nitpicking my entire event proposal, I've had yet another conversation with a work colleague about how wonderful everything must be now that my partner is home. Everything has to be perfect—because how can it not be? If she only knew the amount of inner turmoil I feel in trying to adapt to him being back. Everything has changed—from when and what I eat for dinner to when I see my friends (who have virtually vanished since everyone's partners have come home). And right now, I would like nothing more than to go home to an empty apartment and do absolutely nothing while wallowing in *my* day's misfortunes. But I can't because he will be there. While I don't doubt he will understand my bad day, I feel there is no way to explain why and how I would like nothing more than to have the apartment to myself for the evening.

The guilt sinks in, and I start to cry. Why do I feel so disconnected from him? What if there is something wrong? This is my second meltdown this week, and I can't bear to talk about this with him and get nowhere...again. I can't find the right words to express what I'm feeling, and we both always end up frustrated and mad. What if we never get back into a routine?

Life as a military partner can be one of uncertainty. No matter the situation, the military is always in control. From where you live, when you leave, how and when you travel, and what access you have, a dependent of a military member is just that—dependent. One of the hardest aspects of military life is deployment. Deployments place multiple stressors on families, and researchers have taken note (e.g., Sahlstein, Maguire, & Timmerman, 2009; Ashbury & Martin, 2012; Knobloch, Ebata, McGlaughlin, & Ogolsky, 2013). From personal experience as a former military partner, the deployment itself flew by. I busied myself with work and made friends with other partners going through a similar situation. Eight months came and went. Before I knew it, homecoming was here. The hardest part of the deployment process was the return of my partner and the adjustment that accompanied it, which filled me with an incredible amount of guilt. Although he was with me, I felt alone.

What They Say

“You chose to marry him. You made that decision.”

What I Think/Say

Think: Yes, I sure did. But that doesn't take away the fact it's hard when he has to leave for God-knows-how-long, and I become the sole person responsible for our life. I try not to think about it, but there is a chance he won't come back. It's hard feeling yourself worry all the time.

Say: "Yes, I did. I guess I can't really complain. I did make that choice."

"This really shouldn't be a surprise to you.

What were you expecting?"

Think: What *was* I expecting? I was expecting for him to get leave when they said he would be able to take leave. I was expecting to be able to attend the concert together that we bought amazing seats for my birthday—not for him to be sent on a last minute training. I was expecting for him to be with me the week leading up to the deployment, not assigned ship's watch last minute for five days and unable to come home.

Say: "I guess I don't know."

"I understand what you mean. I've been in a long distance relationship for two months, and I know exactly what you are going through."

Think: Do you? Do you know what it's like to say goodbye at a ship or a plane fighting the thought you may not see the person you love again? Do you know what it's like to endlessly watch your phone because you haven't heard from that person via *any* form of modern communication for a month? I bet you talk to your partner every day for hours through every available technological outlet. Do you look for a uniformed Marine when you come home each night, making sure today isn't the day you get the news you've feared for four months? I don't think you have the slightest clue what I am going through.

Say: "It's tough, isn't it?"

“I did a long distance relationship one time.
We only lasted one month then had to end
it. I don’t understand how you do it.”

Think: It isn’t my preference. Honestly, do
you think this is something we both enjoy
doing? We see each other for a week, then
we are apart for four, then he comes back
for three, then leaves for months. It’s
terrible.

Say: “It is hard, but it works for us.”

“I can’t imagine having to go without my
partner for that long. I can barely handle
him being gone for two days.”

Think: It’s unimaginable until you have to
do it, then you have no alternative but to
handle it. What choice do I have? What do
you expect me to do? Sit in a corner and cry
for eight months until he comes home? That
sounds enjoyable.

Say: “It’s tough sometimes. But as weird as
it sounds, you develop a routine without
him.”

“He’s home now. Everything must be perfect!”

Think: Perfect?! I guess if you call
shamelessly annoying each other while
being in the same vicinity perfect, then sure.
Clearly you’ve never done a deployment.
Say: “Yes! It’s wonderful!”

As with most cultures, military life can be confusing and easily misunderstood by those not directly involved (often referred to by the military culture simply as *civilians*). Military culture includes the military member, but as civilians oftentimes forget, military partners are very much an active part of this culture. Partners enter military life with a level of naivety quickly squashed by a world of rank and chain of command. In my experience, I had no idea what I was getting myself into the day I became partners with a military member. Similar to the military member trying to explain his or her job to a civilian, the same became true for me defending my relational decisions as a military partner. Military partners learn quickly what to disclose to civilians regarding their struggles and triumphs within their relationship with their military member. Socially constructed norms shared by a majority of society regarding romantic relationships, both long distance and close proximity, do not clearly translate into military relationships.

While any couple experiencing a long distance relationship experiences the stress of being apart for long periods of time, as well as the short times together, military families experience a different struggle when navigating long distance (Frisby, Byrnes, Mansson,

Booth-Butterfield, & Birmingham, 2011). Long distance can mean multiple things, but more often than not, deployments are the most common form of distance experienced by military couples. Deployments can be to a warzone or a long-term training site, hostile or friendly, and most important, they can last anywhere from three months to a year—sometimes longer. More than two million military members have experienced a deployment since 2001—many of whom experienced multiple deployments (Parcell & Maguire, 2014a). Since September 11, 2001, deployments have moved away from the traditional linear model, which had a strict beginning and end (Villagran, Canzona, & Ledford, 2013). Instead of having ample time to reintegrate upon return, redeployments happen more frequently, sometimes within nine months of homecoming. The new structure adds pressure to quickly reintegrate for military members and their families.

Since 2009, research has broadened to include the impact deployments have on families and their communication patterns (Maguire, 2015). With this development in research, more focus is placed on the military partner left at home as well as the children. Mirroring the shift from the military in recent decades regarding the family's role in a military member's term of service, scholars are expanding research in the social sciences to include the effects and aftermaths of military deployment on families in addition to military members. While families do not experience the deployment the same way as their military member, military partners are left with the responsibility of both parties in their military member's absence. Partners become single parents, routines are adjusted to counter the missing partner, and shifts in both physical and emotional support can occur. Upon return, roles must be both readjusted and re-established, often bringing different trials and tribulations to the relationship not present during deployment. While some couples transition

into close proximity seamlessly, others struggle to establish a comfortable routine together. Overall, changes in the relationship may take place, creating future obstacles and challenges for military families.

Military partners experience more hardship and less than ideal circumstances than most civilians realize (Frisby et al., 2011). Military partners are in a constant state of waiting—waiting for their military member to return home, waiting for their military member to deploy again, waiting for orders to move cross-country in one month's time. Waiting, always waiting. As a society, there is a romanticized view of military life based on what is displayed through various forms of media (Berle & Steele, 2015). Social media and news sources show the excitement of homecomings, but very rarely address anything after the fact. Military life is stressful for all involved. Military partners realize early in their term of “service” their relationships rarely mirror their civilian counterparts. Further, partners learn to repress the frustration, loneliness, and emotion that may accompany their circumstance that is not a pleasing, Hollywood-type story to the “outside” world. Particularly, during deployment and reintegration, emotions run high with little opportunity to share what can happen behind closed doors during the reintegration process. Research in this unique subject area continues to move further away from postpositive, empirical research methods toward an interpretive research approach (e.g. Maguire, 2015; Rossetto, 2015). However, extant research from an interpretive, narrative lens is scant. To provide a greater understanding and emotional look inside the reintegration process, my thesis serves to expand inquiry on the military community through a narrative lens. Through story, military partners are able to share their experiences, both triumphs and hardships endured upon their military member's return from deployment.

My thesis is constructed into five chapters. Following this introductory chapter, I will provide a review of literature consisting of current research regarding long distant relationships and military families. In Chapter 2, I open with a brief overview of literature regarding long distance relationships. I then examine research pertaining to military partners during the deployment and post-deployment cycle. I explore what extant research reveals about military families and research techniques used to obtain and analyze data from participants. As my study looks to broaden current approaches to inquiry regarding military families, it is important to discuss what techniques are currently employed as well as how such techniques affect the data collected and the manner in which they are presented. I argue it is important to move away from empirical techniques when discussing relationships, as relationships often do not follow a strict set of rules (Bochner, Ellis, & Tillmann-Healy, 2000). For this reason, interpretive, narrative approaches should be used, particularly when examining military couples. Through the lens of relational dialectics theory (Baxter, 2011), immediate themes become present regarding interpersonal relationships. However, military couples engage in atypical relational habits compared to their civilian counterparts, introducing the idea a narrative approach may be beneficial to extend beyond the bounds of relational dialectics. As most couples engage in daily maintenance relationship strategies, military members and their partners face different obstacles and situations than their civilian counterparts.

In Chapter 3, I provide a detailed account of the methodology I use throughout this institutional review board (IRB) approved study. Because no two deployments are alike, each military partner faces different hurdles through the deployment cycle. For this reason, I chose to conduct unstructured, interactive interviews (Ellis, Kiesinger, & Tillman-Healy, 1997).

Because this interviewing technique is more collaborative, I strive to channel a deep level of emotion to more richly convey experiences. As a former military spouse, I channel myself into that space to build relationships with participants sharing common emotions and experiences. I then story narratives from the interviews. In storying various narratives from the interviews, I strive to implicate the necessity of creating an “evocative” response from readers (Ellis & Bochner, 2000). As stories provide an outlet for the self to make sense of the experiences that happen as humans, readers are also able to acquire sensemaking abilities and connect not only with myself as the author, but other participants who share their experiences. My goal for the interview process is to create stories that will be told, retold, and encourage further conversation—both in the field of communication and in military communities.

I also examine the ethical considerations of collaborative interviewing, particularly participant consent and confidentiality, as both are equally important in the eyes of the IRB and military. In overview of my methodology, I offer a detailed description of my practices for recording each interview, transcribing audio recordings, and storying the transcriptions, developing them into narratives, and organizing them in Chapter 4. I conducted 25 interviews. All participants identified as female and were partners of military members in four branches of the armed forces. Participation for this study was voluntary. In overview of my methodology, I offer the ability to express and draw new conclusions to help expand trending research and develop new approaches regarding military families.

In Chapter 4, I invite readers to experience various stages of the post-deployment and reintegration processes military partners encounter through story. I present narratives in this section in various formats to evoke a stronger emotional response from readers. While some

narratives are my interpretations of shared stories, others are stories shared from interviews—some follow direct dialogue from an interview. I organize this section in chronological order based on my experience with the reintegration process as a military spouse. While I assigned pseudonyms to each participant, stories appear organized in a messy text format (Marcus, 1994), encouraging readers to come to their own conclusions from the narratives. Each participant possesses a unique story, and no two stories replicate each other directly. Stories range in varying degrees of emotion, showing the excitement and happiness of homecoming and transitioning to the frustration of finding a routine together. While some stories show triumphs, others show the relational ups and downs many military couples face in their daily lives in the months following a homecoming.

Finally, in Chapter 5, I offer discussion, interpretations, limitations of the study, and possibilities for future research through narrative inquiry. I discuss some of the unique experiences present throughout the narratives of Chapter 4. Not only do these experiences within the narratives include relational tensions occurring between partners, but various social constructions are examined, seeking to illuminate how outside expectations add to the already imminent pressure to reintegrate. The primary goal of most military couples following deployment is to fall back into a normal routine, or in some cases, find a new normal. What is normal? How is it determined a “normal” status has been reached? Through these experiences, readers are invited to draw their own conclusions from the stories. While I know I cannot answer that question for every military partner who has experienced a deployment, I seek to offer discussion and insight that solicits understanding and encourages future inquiry opportunities. My goal is to introduce a narrative perspective as a strong research technique to provide intimate and emotionally charged stories regarding personal

relationships. Story is the way that we as humans make sense of the world around us (Fisher, 1984). In order to discover what deployment and post-deployment are like for military couples, stories need to be shown, told, and shared across the discipline.

Summary

Life in the military is not easy. While military members experience multiple stress factors, the partners of those who serve experience stressors as well. However, perspectives on military life—particularly those regarding deployment—remain scarce from the viewpoint of military partners. In this chapter, I began with personal narrative to engage the reader and share some personal insight from the military culture. I provided brief insight into my current inquiry and method, and laid the groundwork for my study and its need in the communication discipline. I concluded this chapter with summaries of what to expect within proceeding chapters of this thesis.

My study serves to broaden the current perspective on military families from an interpretive, narrative lens. Exploring the stories of partners who have experienced the aftermath of deployments, my study works to garner attention to the idea that not all military partners experience the same moments, struggles, stressors, and/or triumphs that extant research highlights as a general umbrella for most military partners. Through story, each partner's unique experience is explored as well as my own experience as a military partner in the aftermath of a deployment.

CHAPTER 2

LITERATURE REVIEW

I begin this chapter with a brief overview of current research pertaining to long distance relationships, as long distance relationships provide unique obstacles for couples compared to their geographically close counterparts. Military relationships are often situated under the long distance relationship umbrella. However, as military couples often experience different stressors while negotiating and navigating long distance and close proximity, I move specifically into current inquiry regarding military deployments and communication. This section focuses, in particular, on communication and the transition of support in both the deployment and post-deployment (reintegration) stages of a deployment cycle. I conclude this chapter with a brief theoretical overview, arguing a move in future research toward postmodern inquiry and the need to explore the military community from an interpretive, narrative lens.

Long Distance Relationships

Long distance relationships are defined as relationships where partners live geographically separated, reunite for a short time, then separate again (Pistole, Roberts, & Chapman, 2010). Research pertaining to long distance relationships has increased in the past ten years due to an increased amount of people participating in long distance romantic relationships. Long distance relationships confuse many interpersonal scholars—a common idea shared in Western culture is in order to have a successful relationship, partners must be in close proximity, have frequent face to face interaction, and participate in various activities together (Stafford, 2010). As a result of distance, less face to face interaction occurs. Interaction is supplemented with technological, mediated forms of communication. Long

distance relationship partners maintain their relationship despite the physical separateness by increasing their communication (Pistole, Roberts, & Chapman, 2010). Access to a variety of communication channels in long distance relationships can help with relational maintenance. Oral channels, such as the telephone, are associated with the use of relational maintenance strategies. Communicating orally via telephone allows for a potential increase in assurance and openness (Dainton & Aylor, 2002). Further, advancements in technology have increased the ability to maintain the relationship even while at a distance, with email, telephone conversations, and computer mediated video communication tools (e.g., Skype, FaceTime) readily available (Weiner & Hannum, 2012).

Compared to geographically close relationships, couples in long distance relationships experience unique relationship stressors (Pistole, Roberts, & Chapman, 2010). Stressors likely present in long distance relationships include increased travel expenses as well as the stress of relationship disruption once the period of proximity has concluded and separation begins again (Pistole, Roberts, & Chapman, 2010). Further, stress can occur while physically together. While all couples experience various degrees of being apart and being together, the transitions to and from are not as seamless for couples in long distance relationships (Sahlstein, 2004). This can be attributed to the transition between being independent while apart to interdependent while together. Also, being physically separate can enhance the feeling of uncertainty experienced by couples. Partners in long distance relationships look for certainty pertaining to their relationships due to the gaps that occur between times of seeing each other (Sahlstein, 2006). Partners feel the need to make plans when they are physically together to maintain certainty. Making plans can include anything

from physical intimacy to doing fun activities together in order to maximize the face to face interaction.

Despite the distance, studies have shown long distance couples report higher levels of relationship satisfaction overall compared to geographically close couples (Stafford, 2010; Stafford & Merolla, 2007; Sahlstein, 2004). However, this increase in relational satisfaction could be due to both partner and relationship idealization (Sahlstein, 2004; Brody, 2013). Idealization can be described as “the tendency to describe a partner or relationship in overly positive terms” (Brody, 2013, p. 323). Overlooking the negative aspects of the relationship is easier when face to face communication is less likely. Without face to face communication, communication takes the form of mediated communication. This may allow idealizations to flourish and overly positive images of relationships to form. Compared to geographically close relationships, long distance partners experience more topic avoidance, conflict avoidance, and selective positive self-presentation in order to minimize differences (Stafford, 2010). Couples in long distance relationships are “more likely to overlook negative aspects of their relationships, to accentuate the positive characteristics and to make the most of their interaction” (Sahlstein, 2004, p. 691). Should the relationship progress to a geographically close relationship, these practices could eventually lead to more stress.

In long distance relationships, approximately 50% of couples experience the change of long distance to geographically close (Stafford, Merolla, & Castle, 2006). While close proximity can be a relational goal in order to progress the relationship, idealization occurring while geographically separated may not carry over once geographically close. While couples in long distance relationships tend to show similar or higher relationship stability than couples who are geographically close, couples in long distance relationships are more likely

to terminate their relationship once in close proximity (Stafford & Merolla, 2007). One third of relationships end within the first three months during the transition from a long distance relationship to a geographically close relationship (Stafford, Merolla, & Castle, 2006).

Factors such as loss of autonomy and novelty as well as increased knowledge about one's partner (both positive and negative), time management difficulties, and heightened conflict all contribute to the dissolution of relationships (Stafford, Merolla, & Castle, 2006).

Idealizing a partner during the separation period can increase the difficulty of the relationship once proximally close. While the aforementioned struggles are present within most couples experiencing a long distance relationship, military couples experience additional stressors in regards to distance compared to their civilian counterparts.

Military Long Distance Relationships

While any couple experiencing a long distance relationship experiences the stress of being apart for long periods of time, military families experience a different struggle when navigating long distance (Frisby et al., 2011). Deployments are one of the more prominent types of distance experienced by military couples, separating their long distance experience from their civilian counterparts. Although both military and long distance civilian couples experience stress within their relationships, management of the stress can vary significantly by both parties (Frisby et al., 2011). Civilians can often choose how and when they see each other while long distant. Military couples, particularly during deployment, are subject to third party rules and regulations, making the degree of separation quite different.

Deployments have been appraised as stressful events, triggering several coping responses from both the partner and military member (Padden, Connors, & Agazio, 2011). However, deployments and reunions do not affect all families the same way (Faber,

Willerton, Clymer, MacDermid, & Weiss, 2008). Each military couple handles the stress of deployment and post-deployment differently, as no two relationships are alike. Similarly, couples prepare and handle deployment differently from one another as separation for some time becomes apparent. While military members train with other service members to prepare for deployment, partners equally prepare for deployment but with limited support (Jordan, 2011). Unlike their military members, partners prepare for deployment individually. The more frequent the deployment, particularly to combat zones, the more changes personally and relationally military members and partners experience alike. While partners experience different struggles than their military members during deployment, partners are also susceptible to various mental stressors when their military members experience a deployment to hostile territories/combat zones or experience a deployment longer than eleven months (Jordan, 2011). These stressors can include anxiety, depression, stress, and sleep disorders. Similar to their military member, partners often experience hesitation to discuss such issues due to the perceived negative stigma of seeking help within the military.

Deployments cycles typically occur in three primary stages (Parcell & Maguire, 2014b). Stage one is the pre-deployment stage, which includes work-ups and various trainings. Stage two is the deployment. Stage three includes the reintegration period once the military member returns home, typically called post-deployment. Despite the number of stressors that may accompany deployments, issues at home prove to be the largest stressor for military members while away (Carter & Renshaw, 2015). Frequent deployments can lead to various struggles for military members and can also affect family members. While it has been shown military couples score higher in research in terms of social support, they also score significantly higher in terms of marital discourse—meaning frequent strife within the

marriage. The pressure and stress that accompanies the military lifestyle is linked to increased divorce rates (Frisby et al., 2011). Since September 11, 2011, deployment structures have changed drastically. Consequently, the increase in length and “heightened pace” of deployments has led to rising divorce rates among military couples (Karney & Crown, 2011). Specifically, “80% of military spouses have frequently considered divorce compared to 17% of civilian spouses” (Ashbury & Martin, 2012, p. 47). Because many military couples have expressed the strains deployment places on the relationship, the current study focuses on the last two stages of the deployment process—deployment and post-deployment.

As with most couples, military couples engage in relational maintenance strategies almost daily. Military spouses perceive higher levels of emotional stress than their partners during the deployment cycle (Karakurt, Christiansen, Wadsworth, & Weiss, 2012). Maintenance strategies are developed for all three stages of the deployment. These strategies differ between partners, as each mentally prepares for deployment in different ways. Sahlstein, Maguire, and Timmerman (2009) address that three contradictions are at play during the deployment cycle. However, for the purpose of the current research, pre-deployment will not be discussed. The two tensions present are autonomy-connection during the deployment and openness-closedness during reunion and post-deployment. Using relational dialectics theory (Baxter, 2011) as a lens, current research strives to parallel the discourse discussed by Baxter to post-deployment reintegration.

Deployment

Autonomy-connection is the primary struggle during deployment (Sahlstein, Maguire, & Timmerman, 2009). The tension between autonomy and connection refers to the desire to

remain separate yet maintain a sense of connectedness that typically accompanies a romantic interpersonal relationship (Baxter, 2011). During deployment, military partners often experience tension between wanting to remain connected to their military member and establishing independence (Joseph & Afifi, 2010). Partners tend to feel the weight of carrying an additional role as well as battling the want/need for closeness to their military member. Partners experience “loss of emotional support, loneliness, role overload, role shifts, and concerns about the safety” of their military member (Faber et al., 2008, p. 222).

Although there is “emotional upheaval” immediately following separation and beginning deployment, “it is fairly short-lived as the family enters a ‘new normal’” without their military member present (Maguire, 2015, p. 22) In recent research, four common themes are prevalent pertaining to relationships and how couples navigate long distance through deployment: intermittent idealized closeness, transitions in sources of social support, independence to interdependence, and renegotiating roles (Karakurt et al., 2012). Partners work to find a new normal at the beginning of the deployment, often restructuring routines to accommodate for the missing person (Maguire, 2015). Partners engage in coping mechanisms to manage the stress of the deployment and separation, even more so when children are involved. The struggle between connectedness and independence is most apparent when navigating communication throughout the deployment.

Communication. While communicating with deployed military members, “70% of military spouses report technical and logistical difficulties” (Faber et al., 2008, p. 222). However, technological improvements assist in preventing the struggles partners experience regarding an absence of closeness. While keeping in touch is not a guarantee, mediated communication can help maintain relationships at a distance (Maguire, Heinemann-LaFavre,

& Sahlstein, 2013). New forms of technology have helped make communication at a distance possible, keeping partners closer during deployment (Carter & Renshaw, 2015). However, some reports suggest frequent communication with one's partner runs the risk of the military member feeling helpless and distracted. Similarly, both partners and military members withhold seemingly stressful or negative information while communicating during deployment to prevent unnecessary stress in regards to deployment and relationship issues alike (Knobloch, Theiss, & Wehrman, 2015). Specifically, military members particularly sidestep certain relationship issues including "the dynamics of their romantic and family ties, sex and fidelity, money troubles, and reunion concerns" (Knobloch, Theiss, & Wehrman, 2015, p. 53). Because communication is not always accessible, and the military member typically cannot be fully transparent while away, innovative technology does not take the place of being in close proximity. Most military partners seek to use those times as times to connect emotionally through the distance—opposed to adding more stress to an already stressful situation.

The struggle to communicate across the distance creates interesting dynamics for couples, who constantly navigate what is appropriate to say to their partners. Partners in particular have reported feeling less satisfied with their relationship the more they communicate with their deployed military member (Joseph & Afifi, 2010). This could be largely due to the buffering strategies partners employ, meaning military partners are less likely to disclose stressors and negative information to their deployed military member in order to avoid adding additional stress. Buffering restricts open communication and forces the partner to withhold information, which can add stress to the military partner at home. As a result, most partners prefer open communication to restricted communication (Carter &

Renshaw, 2015). Open communication throughout the entirety of the deployment continues to be a struggle for couples, as the military provides restrictions to the communication in order to protect operation security. Specifically, military partners are encouraged by their military members' command to keep communication positive and avoid sharing potentially stressful or negative information (Joseph & Afifi, 2010). The limits to communication during deployment can inhibit the communication process at the conclusion of deployment transitioning into post-deployment.

Support. Partners are forced to shift their social support from each other to friends and family nearby. Because of the relocation lifestyle that typically accompanies the military, many partners are geographically distant from their families (High, Jennings-Kelsall, Solomon, & Marshall, 2015). Often, partners satisfy their need for social support through other military partners who are experiencing similar lifestyles (Maguire, 2015). When partners interact with support groups or members, it has potential to positively affect the romantic relationship upon reunion (Merolla, 2010). Most branches of the service offer family readiness programs, which are designed specifically to offer support to partners during times of separation. Family readiness programs are not always the most accessible to partners, either through distance for partners who do not live in close proximity to base or the inner group turmoil. Relationships within the support groups can be complex and provide support to some partners while marginalizing others (Parcell & Maguire, 2014a).

Hierarchical matters and control limit participation in such groups, causing partners to feel more stress on top of the separation already experienced. As a result, social support can also be achieved through the use of computer mediated support groups (High et al., 2015) and telephone hotline support groups (Nichols, Martindale-Adams, Graney, Zuber, & Burns,

2013). In some instances, significant improvements to depression-like symptoms and anxiety are aided by online and telephone support groups. Technology mediated support groups generally improve feelings of connection and can provide needed support as well as a separate stress outlet.

However, military partners continue to not use the multitude of resources available in forms such as family readiness groups or technology mediated support groups (Nichols et al., 2013). Instead, partners rely on emotional support from other military partners experiencing similar situations (Rossetto, 2015). Support from other partners experiencing similar situations aids in buffering stress partners experience during their military members' absences (Nichols et al., 2013). Often, partners of military members welcome words of support and encouragement from others who acknowledge their struggle, but they experience a fine line between encouragement and pity. Specifically, military partners are much more welcoming to words of encouragement and support from members of the military community than from their civilian counterparts (Rossetto, 2015). Many partners feel like their civilian counterparts do not fully comprehend their situation, resulting in misunderstood circumstances and unlikely comparisons, leaving the military partner feeling even more stress and frustration.

Post-Deployment

Most partners are excited to welcome deployed military members home. Homecomings and reunions are happy times for most partners the first four to six weeks, known as the honeymoon period (Sahlstein, Maguire, & Timmerman, 2009). However, opposed to the deployed military member integrating back in, the partner left behind experiences more upheaval during post-deployment (Knobloch & Theiss, 2012). Military

couples report “emotional numbness, difficulty conceding autonomy, feelings of insecurity, and awkwardness in sexual relations” during reintegration (Knobloch & Theiss, 2012, p. 425). Specifically, wives found the idea of openness and closedness challenging. Several admit to not engaging in serious conversations during the initial phases of reintegration. Addressing such conversation and the renegotiation of roles and expectations upon return can be a source of uncertainty, stress, and conflict. The challenge of openness-closedness can be heightened if the military member experiences mental health issues upon return (Marini, Wadsworth, Christ, & Franks, 2015). Partners have a tendency to attribute their military member’s avoidance practices to problems within the relationship instead of combat, allowing for further frustration and expanding the possibility of future relational issues as post-deployment progresses.

Difficulty reintegrating refers to the “emotional, behavioral, and relational” challenges military families can experience after a deployment (Knobloch, Ebata, McGlaughlin, & Ogolsky, 2013, p. 755). Some military partners experience higher marital satisfaction during deployment yet significant drops in satisfaction upon reunion and post-deployment (Parcell & Maguire, 2014b). For some couples, reintegrating can be the most stressful part of the deployment cycle. There is a misconception everything will be back to how it was when the deployed military member comes home (Drummet, Coleman, & Cable, 2003) and life will resume as it was before deployment (Faber et al., 2008). However, the communication habits formed during deployments can carry over into communication once reunited (LeBlanc & Olson, 2015). Military partners specifically acknowledge the struggle to transition back to an interdependent partner having been independent throughout the deployment (Karakurt et al., 2012) and the issue of partner interference in everyday tasks

(Theiss & Knobloch, 2011). As roles are re-established and identities renegotiated, military couples must learn how to communicate with each other again in close proximity and create a new normal instead of reverting back to the pre-deployment relationship.

Transition and reintegration can be a source of stress for military couples through multiple channels. While couples who are older, in longer established relationships, or have completed multiple deployments can experience hardships during reintegration, couples who seem to experience the most difficulty with reunion and reintegration are younger couples who are newly married, in a lower ranking status within the military chain of command, or those experiencing their first deployment (Faber et al., 2008). As couples begin to settle into new routines, daily stressors begin to emerge and the threat of upheaval becomes more prevalent (Theiss & Knobloch, 2011). Renegotiation of roles can occur in a multitude of daily tasks, including a shift once again in social support upon a military members' return. The transition in social support can be a source of major tension (Karakurt et al., 2012). For some, the transition toward leaning once again on their partner is seamless. However, others want to continue to spend time with their deployment support groups and feel pressure to spend time with their partner. Other stressors can include reintegrating as a family unit. Military members have reported not feeling part of the family upon return, but more as an intruder, while also stating they feel more comfortable away than at home (Knobloch & Theiss, 2012). Further, military members who are diagnosed with posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD) experience significantly higher rates of relational dysfunction upon reintegration compared to military members who are not diagnosed (Jordan, 2011), adding to the stress of the military partner to establish a new normal. Pressure arises to integrate

quickly, as feelings of guilt and relational uncertainty become apparent should reintegration appear to not happen seamlessly.

Sharing and withholding information occurs within all relationships, especially among military couples following deployment (Knobloch, Ebata, McGlaughlin, & Theiss, 2013). Frequent deployments heighten anxiety and uncertainty as well as decrease relational closeness and satisfaction (Merolla, 2010). All factors help contribute to communication struggles that can be experienced upon a deployment's end. The more uncertain military couples are about their relationship, the more trouble they may have openly discussing reintegration stressors (Knobloch, Ebata, McGlaughlin, & Ogolsky, 2013). While support from others can help individuals manage uncertainty during deployment (Cramer, Tenzek, & Allen, 2015), uncertainty during reintegration is often left to military couples to figure out and work through themselves. Military members are fearful of becoming open, as they are unsure how others will react (Sahlstein, Maguire, & Timmerman, 2009). Further, attempts at openness might be met with resistance by both the military and society due to the culture and stigmatization that complete openness is a sign of weakness or fragility within a marriage. As military members experience more "generalized anxiety," partners engage in more topic avoidance in order to counterbalance (Knobloch, Ebata, McGlaughlin, & Theiss, 2013, p. 471). Therefore, depending on the nature of the deployment, topic avoidance and uncertainty can vary for both parties.

Because each deployment varies and each couple's relationship and experience through deployment is different, it is important to expand current inquiry beyond the traditional postpositivist approaches and toward an interpretive perspective. In the following section, I argue for a transition toward an interpretive, narrative approach in research

pertaining to military families and their experiences to expand postmodern inquiry and provide resources and information to assist in the deployment and reintegration process.

Theoretical/Methodological Approaches

The preceding is a review of current inquiry pertaining to military members and their families. While research regarding the effects of military deployments has increased since 2009 (Maguire, 2015), research, and particularly the presentation of recent inquiry, remains scant from an interpretive, narrative lens. Recent inquiry has sought to apply theory to the deployment and reintegration process, mainly through the relational turbulence model (e.g. Knobloch & Theiss, 2012) and the family stress theory (Karakurt et al., 2012). Research has varied through survey (e.g. Frisby et al., 2011; Knobloch & Theiss, 2012; Knobloch, Theiss, Wehrman, 2015; Theiss & Knobloch, 2011) and interview methods (Parcell & Maguire, 2014b; LeBlanc & Olsen, 2015; Karakurt et al., 2012; and Rossetto, 2015), yet it fails to present data in a manner that encompasses the evocative narrative behind the scenes of military couples during post-deployment and reintegration. Speaking as a military spouse, stereotypes and general umbrella groupings left me feeling frustrated, as many of the stereotypes and statistics did not apply. If the military community's field of research in communication is to continue to expand and provide resources for military families, research must transition to more postmodern inquiry to offer practical research that military members, and partners in particular, can relate with.

Postpositivism. Postpositivism seeks to quantify communication in some way. Can communication within a relationship always be quantified? While postpositivist methods are not as stringent as their positivist counterparts, postpositivism still seeks to predict and control (Phillips, 1990). Science is not static. Consequently, “many theoretical entities

cannot be verified in terms of sense experience; neither can laws be determined absolutely” (Phillips, 1990, p. 39). While this form of inquiry serves to provide statistics for the Department of Defense with regards to military families, these studies do little to provide useful resources for military partners living through the experience. Brooks (2016), interviewing Knobloch regarding military family inquiry, mentions “most of the studies have been done through online surveys” (par. 14). Can you embody the deployment experience and its aftermath through survey? Can emotion and feeling transmit through a generalized, online survey? Such methods seek to collect data through a variety of similar methods to construct a solid database, not to provide relatable, usable information for those seeking to connect and have an evocative experience.

Interpretivism. Because interpretive methods of inquiry require the researcher to become involved with individuals and events surrounding each individual style of communication, researchers become involved in their inquiry. Recently, there has been a turn toward the interpretive perspective and its focus on human sensemaking (Bochner, Ellis, & Tillmann-Healy, 2000). This turn in recent inquiry allows the focus to shift from mere objects to meaning. Within current military research, several scholars employ various interpretive methods, primarily through interview (e.g., Rossetto, 2015; LeBlanc & Olson, 2015; Parcell & Maguire, 2014b). In conducting interviews, researchers are able to connect with their participants through language in a collaborative, non-competitive manner. Stewart (1995) argues that human beings are engaged in everyday coping within the world around them. Further, “humans do not simply possess or use language,” but “inhabit it” (Stewart, 1995, p. 29). It is important for military partners to not be observed from an objective, detached stance typically utilized in survey-based data collection. Connecting on a deeper,

emotional level allows researchers and people, in their everyday lives, to gain a unique understanding of those experiences instead of overgeneralized umbrella statistics.

Interpretivism seeks to make social knowledge as we are always already doing in everyday life (Leeds-Hurwitz, 1995). Essentially, we work together to create each other. Rossetto (2015) illustrates this method beautifully in her interview process, working individually with each military partner to gauge their level of support within the military and civilian community. Parcell and Maguire (2014b) strive to connect with military partners as they seek to find trajectories within the deployment process. Mehta and Jorgenson (2015) narratively interview Air Force wives as they struggle to find their own independence while a dependent of a military member and the lifestyle that encompasses. However, to more easily convey the experiences, all the aforementioned examples remove the participant from the data discussion. Each simply includes excerpts from the interview, instead of allowing readers to get to know participants and channel what they are feeling on an emotional level. As Bochner, Ellis, and Tillmann-Healy (1998) mention, often lengthy interviews are reduced to snippets of information within the interview in order to convey a specific thought and significance. As a result, the reader most likely knows very little about the participants within the study. In imagining an “ideal reader” (Bochner, 2014, p. 21), inquiry regarding military deployment and its relational aftermath should seek to aesthetically appeal to those it affects most. In postmodern fashion, there should be no theory, no ending, and no generalized umbrella under which each military partner in every military relationship neatly falls.

Moving toward narrative. To date, not one article pertaining to military couples and the struggles experienced by both parties is presented in a narrative method. Interpretive data collecting methods have been utilized, but the data presented does not embody the true

emotion behind a deployment, as the results are presented in thematic form or as mere excerpts from interview transcriptions. Narratives are both a “means of knowing and a way of telling” (Bochner, Ellis, & Tillmann-Healy, 2000, p. 16). Further, by emphasizing the stories people tell about their lives, narratives are constructed “as both a means of knowing and way of telling about the social world.” (Bochner, 2012, p. 155). In order to fully engage readers from the military and civilian communities, it is imperative data take the form of narrative and story. As Bochner (2012) asserts,

By offering stories that show the struggle of ordinary people coping with difficult contingencies of lived experience . . . our research stories can help people put themselves in the place of others and consider important aspects of their own lives in the terms offered by context and details of other peoples’ stories. (p. 160)

Expounding narratives has potential to create resources/relatable experiences for military partners experiencing similar circumstances through deployment and reintegration. In order to push inquiry in this particular field forward, I argue this is the direction future inquiry must examine.

Summary

Most military couples have suggested some change occurred within the relationship upon the conclusion of deployment (Theiss & Knobloch, 2011). With both military members and partners acknowledging deployment as having the potential to either improve or deteriorate the relationship (Carter & Renshaw, 2015), future inquiry should focus on stories from couples’ experiences during the reintegration process. In this chapter I provided a brief overview of inquiry pertaining to long distance relationships. In greater detail, I discussed current inquiry regarding military couples’ relational practices during the deployment and

post-deployment stages of the deployment cycle. I examined the transitions of support as the deployment process progressed as well as potential challenges military partners face upon reunion and reintegration. I concluded with an argument to embrace and engage the turn toward an interpretive, narrative approach to relational inquiry, examining current methods research is collected and presented.

Parcell and Maguire (2014b) note little is known about communication quality relational events during a deployment and its aftermath. While everyone's experience is different, speaking directly to partners about their deployment experiences and addressing various types of communication successes and failures can benefit military partners in the future as well as expand current postmodern inquiry. Increasing awareness provides a resource to other partners experiencing similar situations and moments during and after deployments, potentially providing solace during times of frustration (Parcell & Maguire, 2014b). Because partners of military members experience the most upheaval during the post-deployment cycle, the people who are left behind are central to the current inquiry. Because 85.1% of active duty military members are men (Profile of the Military Community, 2013), women comprise the vast majority of the interviewees. In the next chapter, Chapter 3, I provide a detailed account of my methodology, covering the interview process and storying the narratives shared.

CHAPTER 3

METHODOLOGY

While every military couple will more than likely experience at least one deployment during their time in the armed services, no two deployment experiences are alike. From the length and type of deployment to the amount and quality of communication available during times apart, each military partner faces different hurdles, and, as a result, different reintegration processes upon the end of each deployment. For this reason, I conducted unstructured, interactive interviews (Ellis, Kiesinger, & Tillmann-Healy, 1997) to highlight different experiences of participants. This type of qualitative inquiry, an interpretive narrative approach, allows participants to expand upon their unique experiences as we work together to move through the aftermath of a deployment.

In this chapter, I begin with my interview process, explaining my technique and rationale for conducting unstructured, interactive interviews and their benefits. Next, I move to narrative, as providing a narrative account of the deployment process is one of the main foci of my thesis. I have engaged a narrative approach and benefited from this postmodern form of inquiry. I discuss the process of storying narratives as well as the use of narrative truth through memory. As a majority of participants in the present study are past the post-deployment stage or since separated from the military, it is important to discuss the use of memory and the establishment of narrative truth. I follow with the interview procedure. I discuss my participants, providing demographic information and the importance of confidentiality to protect their identities. I conclude with the process of storying the narratives, searching for unique experiences from each participant, and the ordering and organization of narratives in Chapter 4.

Interactive Interviewing

Ellis, Kiesinger, and Tillmann-Healy (1997) suggest interactive interviewing practices when working with emotionally charged experiences to gain an in-depth understanding of the situation. Deployments are emotionally trying. From the moment “goodbye” is said, routines are restructured to accommodate the change in partnership. However, just as much upheaval occurs for the person left behind upon the military member’s return. Originally used primarily in studies of family (Laslett & Rapoport, 1975), interactive interviews have expanded to include a variety of different types of research in the communication field. Because these types of interviews typically involve meeting with participants more than once, interviews were conducted more reflexively and dyadic in style and nature (Ellis & Berger, 2003). Since my study does not focus on a set group of military couples through the various stages of deployment, a reflexive, dyadic style allowed stories to flow between the interviewer (myself) and participants while maintaining an interpretive, narrative approach.

Interactive or collaborative interviewing has been positioned as a feminist approach (Ellis & Berger, 2003). These interviews strive to establish an emotional connection between researchers and participants. Like the friendship model expressed in Tretheway’s (1997) research regarding power and resistance, looking to establish relationships with participants provides a more trusting and intimate connection. As a result, interactive interviewing eliminates the strict relational structure of interviewer/interviewee, which is rife with power differentials. While interviewers still lead in asking questions to seek answers from participants, interviewers provide personal experiences as well to elaborate on the topic being discussed (Ellis & Berger, 2003). This enables the interview to become more of a

conversation instead of a “question-and-answer” exchange (Ellis & Berger, 2003, p. 162). Participants are encouraged to share their experiences freely. Emotions, and channeling them effectively, are key to the interview’s success (Ezzy, 2010). The emergent narratives cannot be storied without emotions.

Interviewing is one of the most powerful ways in which we try to understand each other as humans (Fontana & Frey, 2000). While interactive interviewing differs from many forms of oral history due to the personal involvement of the researcher, oral history provides a firsthand view of a lived experience by participants (Janesick, 2014). Using an unstructured, interactive interview format can allow access to oral histories. Further, unstructured interviews provide a greater “breadth of data” than other types of interviews, allowing the interview to expand in content (Fontana & Frey, 2000, p. 652). By accessing these personal narratives, researchers are encouraged to creatively engage discovery through interviewing in order to connect with a person’s life story. In this study, the stories are based on the “histories and experiences” (Kiesinger, 1998, p. 88) of military partners who have all experienced a common event, deployment and reintegration. The end goal is to re/present the emotion of this lived experience in a “vivid and detailed” way (Kiesinger, 1998, p. 91). To accomplish this goal, interviews must be evocatively storied.

Storying the Narratives

To address issues of representation, interview transcriptions are presented as narrative recollections. Similar to Kiesinger (1998), interviews are storied and connected back and forth between stories of my own personal experience and the participants’. Storying interviews into narratives provides a more “evocative” experience for readers (Ellis & Bochner, 2000). The more details shared and expressed during the interview process, the

more evocative the narrative can be. Bochner (2000) states, “we narrate to make sense of experience over the course of time” (p. 270). Because we experience our lives as stories, we should strive to represent them as stories (Bochner, 2012). Asking participants to share their stories invites them to personally reflect back on their experiences, potentially leading to epiphanies and sensemaking. Further, storying the narrative itself can lead to more coherence for the experience. Due to the sometimes “ambiguous and open-ended” nature of experiences (Bochner, 2000, p. 270), narratives allow for reflection after the fact. This method provides new insight to the extant research regarding deployments and military couples and could provide helpful resources for future researchers and military partners.

Narratives. Why personal narrative? Narratives create reality. Language is only accessible and meaningful in the form of stories (Fisher, 1984). Therefore, all human beings are storytellers. As storytellers, “there may be no better way to come to terms with how we want to live and what we can understand and say about how others live” than through story and sharing story with others (Bochner, 2012, p. 162). In addition, stories are not the only way we display ourselves to others, but they are essential to “our way of becoming who we are” (Bochner, Ellis, & Tillmann-Healy, 1998, p. 43). Without stories, we have no way to make sense of our experiences. Further, we would lack the ability to relate and communicate with each other. To contribute, the narratives shared are storied in hope of evoking an emotional response from readers. As Ellis and Bochner (2000) note,

[Narratives] long to be used rather than analyzed; to be told and retold rather than theorized and settled; to offer lessons for further conversation rather than undebatable conclusions; and to substitute the companionship of intimate detail for the loneliness of abstracted facts. (p. 744)

The goal of the interview process is to construct and tell stories that do something through being used, told, retold, and encouraging further conversation. These stories are not only to be used to enhance the phenomenon in the communication field, but as potential resources for military partners moving forward.

Narratives also function as a “means of persuasion” (Bochner, Ellis, & Tillmann-Healy, 1998, p. 46). Similar to their social scientific foil, narratives command as much, if not more, power in persuasion than numbers and statistics. We tell stories to not only find meaning and understanding in our individual experiences, but in our collective experiences as well (Ellis, 2009). In most social scientific inquiry, readers are discouraged from seeing and feeling the struggles and/or emotions of participants (Bochner, Ellis, & Tillmann-Healy, 1998). Despite that, the goal of narrative inquiry is for readers to connect with others and their stories, in hopes of the reader reflecting on their own experience or relationship. As Bochner, Ellis, and Tillmann-Healy (2000) stress, “to have or be in a relationship is to have or be in a story and, usually, to want to tell about it” (p. 17). We are all storytellers. Further, we are all storytellers searching for meaning to help us cope with various circumstances/experiences (Bochner, Ellis, & Tillmann-Healy, 2000). Military partners possess unique stories in our society. To re/present their experiences, I sought to work with narrative as a means of asking and persuading readers to connect and share in participants’ experiences.

Much like Kiesinger’s (1998) work, some of the stories are constructed from my interpretation of stories shared with me by participants. My understandings of participants’ stories often began as we all understand stories, rooted in my own personal experiences. In this case, my experience as a former military partner. The ultimate goal of narrative work

potentially serves to not only broaden research approaches when dealing with military families, but to shed light on the myriad of experiences each individual military partner may encounter upon the aftermath of deployment. How do we illuminate those experiences? Coles (1989) suggests we do not do it with theories, but with story. Stories shed light on personal experiences in ways theory cannot (Bochner, Ellis, & Tillmann-Healy, 1998), and it is through these stories evocative, vulnerable, concrete life experiences can be re/presented and expressed to larger communities. In sharing experiences, Ellis (2009) believes stories, perhaps, make us less vulnerable. If they do not, we can still find vulnerability “is not necessarily a bad thing” (p. 188). In order to make the military partner experience less taboo, it becomes crucial to convey vulnerability as well as other emotions to increase understanding of the culture—both from the outside and within.

Narrative truth and memory. Bochner (2012) argues the truth within a story or narrative exists solely between the author and the reader. My methodology strives to connect readers with the participants who share their stories, whether they are experiencing a similar event or have experienced a similar emotion in an entirely different context. While I should have a personal commitment to writing truthful accounts (Ellis, 1997), personal narratives are not and cannot be based entirely on “pure facts” (Bochner, Ellis, & Tillmann-Healy, 2000) due to emotions present both during an experience and after an experience has occurred and is recollected through memory. As Ellis (1997) mentions, the “validity” of a story can and should be determined by emotional response from readers and its authenticity and believability. Therefore, *narrative truth* occurs through a story’s ability to blur the lines between author and reader, participant and observer.

While the past is, indeed, the past, “narrative truth seeks to keep the past alive in the present” (Ellis, 1997, p. 129). These truths, however, are not *historical truths*, and they do not desire to be (Bolen & Adams, in press). The truths presented through narrative are “emotional, dialogic, and collaborative” (Bochner, 2012, p. 161). The validity and truthfulness of stories are created through interactions between interviewers and interviewees, transferred through interactions between authors and audiences. I work to present narrative truths, as shared with me by participants, to readers. Further, as Ellis (1997) expresses, by allowing readers to consistently negotiate and navigate between the story on the page and their own personal story, they can compare their experiences to the narratives of others or come to their own conclusions about what is occurring. It is through narrative we are able to explore and begin to understand meanings and significance of the past (Bochner, Ellis, & Tillmann-Healy, 2000). Life and narrative are inextricably and dialectically bound. Life both anticipates telling and draws meaning from it because “narrative is both about living and a part of it” (Bochner, Ellis, & Tillmann-Healy, 2000, p. 18). Telling and sharing narratives is integral to our existence. Through story, I asked military family members to look back and reflect on their experiences through deployment and reintegration. My interpretations, my narrations of their stories ask readers to interpret truths of shared experience to evoke an emotional response as well as cast light on the lives of military partners during deployment and reintegration.

The majority of participants I interviewed identified as having either completed or nearly completed the post-deployment stage, or they have since separated from the military. Because experience exists partially in the past, their participation required them to shift their experiences to the present to access their lived experiences. Bochner (2007) notes,

“remembering is active and continual” (p. 200), and storytelling is a direct form of recollecting those memories (Bochner, Ellis, & Tillmann-Healy, 2000). However, Bochner (2007) underscores,

When we attempt to fit language to experience, we learn that there is always a cleavage between experience and words, between living through and narrating about...between what we remember now and what we say took place then, between how we mourn and work through the past and what shape our grieving gives to our future. (p. 197)

Our interpretations of memories are shaped by our present understandings and the limitations of our ability to language past experience. Memory is what is re/membered now, from what we know now—not from what we knew then (Bochner, 2007). Relationally, our relationships are created between memories of our pasts and the “anticipation” of our futures (Bochner, Ellis, & Tillmann-Healy, 2000, p. 19). Military partners are asked to make sense of their experiences using their current situations/experiences/language in relation to the events from past deployment and post-deployment.

Through memory we “find and create meanings and experiences in ourselves and others,” but we also bring forward the “lives and struggles of those who came before us” (Giorgio, 2013, p. 407). While the participants in this study represent a section of military partners in today’s armed services, the unique experiences of some do not encompass the indeterminable experiences of all military partners—past, present, and future. However, showing these experiences through story renders possible past, present, and future military partners to witness military partner experiences through the lenses of others. Military experiences between partners are rarely the same. Nonetheless, storying stress, failure, and

triumph in hopes of military partners connecting with storied others can encourage sensemaking practices for military partners in the future.

Procedure

Before I could story narratives, I conducted one-on-one interviews. Participants for this IRB approved study were recruited via flyer (Appendix A) placed at the veterans center at a small, Southwest university campus, through posts on social media sites, and by word of mouth. Participants who volunteered called the number listed or sent a personal message through Facebook to arrange a time and location. During the initial contact, participants also provided basic demographic information including age, gender, length of partnership, and number of deployments. Interviews were conducted both face to face and through Skype or Facetime (due to geographic location). An unstructured interview guide (Appendix B) was designed to move the interview along, which consisted of confidentiality notices, rights of participants via the IRB approved consent form (Appendix C), and open-ended, semi-structured questions to begin conversation. I encouraged participants to discuss their experiences in as much detail as possible to foster emotional reflection and response. Because the interviews were designed as a collaborative interview process, various questions—not on the guide—emerged based on individual participant's experiences, as well as my own, to prompt further discussion and narrative exchanges (Ellis, Kiesinger, & Tillman-Healy, 1997). Therefore, each interview I conducted varied in unique ways from the next and previous. I recorded interviews with a digital audio recorder. Upon conclusion of the interviews, I transcribed each one and storied them to further illuminate participants' experiences.

Participants

I interviewed 25 participants over a five month period. Specifically, I conducted ten interviews in the fall 2015 semester and 15 interviews in the spring 2016 semester.

Participants were partners of military members in four branches of the armed service. Based on the collaborative nature of my interview process, interviews ranged from approximately 25 to 77 minutes in length. The total combined duration of the interviews was 21 hours, 13 minutes. Of the 25 interviews, 17 were conducted via FaceTime or Skype due to geographic limitations. All participants identified as female, and they ranged in age from 24 to 71 years old. The average age was 38 years old. The average length of partnership was 14 years, with a two year partnership being the shortest and 51 years being the longest. Fifteen participants experienced multiple deployments with their partner, and 20 participants experienced post-9/11 deployments with their partner.

Narrating the Interviews

Using Sony Sound Organizer, I transcribed all interviews into Microsoft Word. The results were 237 pages of 11 point, Calibri font, single-spaced transcriptions. Each transcription was printed for easier reading and review. Notes from each individual interview, kept in a research journal, were hand-written as comments at the end of each transcription. I also assigned pseudonyms at random from a list of popular girl names from 2015 during this stage. I read and reread interview transcriptions multiple times, looking for diverse and emotionally stirring deployment and post-deployment experiences. I highlighted each story with a yellow highlighter and pulled the excerpts into a larger Microsoft Word document, compiling all stories together for easier organization.

The most common form of ordering events within a story is through linear time (Gergen, 2009). I organized the stories shared in the following chapter, Chapter 4, chronologically based on my personal experience within the deployment process. I begin the narratives with a personal memory of the night before/day my own partner left for his eight month deployment to be a contributing participant, invite readers into my experience, and prepare readers for emotional responses. The narratives then fast-forward in time and shift to re/present arrays of emotions felt immediately before homecoming through the establishment of a new routine as a couple together during post-deployment. Each heading begins with a personal narrative to guide and invite readers into shifting mindsets and timeframes. Doing so also allowed me to reflexively examine my own experiences during whatever particular timeframe was being storied.

The ideal narrative “provides a sense of explanation” (Gergen, 2009, p. 38). To show the often hidden emotion shrouding the post-deployment and reintegration experiences, as well as to “empower” (Bochner, 2000, p. 271) both participants and readers, stories are formatted differently throughout to evoke readers. The stories shared range in format—some are direct stories shared from participants with very little formatting, others are my interpretations of stories (Kiesinger, 1998) shared in hopes of encouraging a stronger emotional response. Some include scenes from the actual interview between myself and participants, exchanges that particularly stirred me during our interaction. I write the following narratives in a messy text structure (Marcus, 1994), asking readers to come to their own conclusions from the narratives. Leaving an “open-endedness” or “incompleteness” (Marcus, 1994, p. 567) to the text allows for varied positions and responses to be gathered. While there are pseudonyms given to each participant of the study, the narratives are

structured in a way to encourage readers to draw their own conclusions. I do not provide conclusions to each story, but challenge readers to examine each story critically and contemplate their own in/conclusions.

Because “one is required to tell a proper story” (Gergen, 2009, p. 37) in order to create both a “truthful” and emotional account, I used the interview transcriptions and pieced them together to create a fluidity, to create a proper story. The information re/presented within each narrative account is from participant’s unique experiences, formatted by myself to create a “well-formed” narrative (Gergen, 2009, p. 38). Stories appear more genuine when they follow the constructed layout we, as readers, have all come to know and expect. Bochner (2000) stresses the author of the narrative—or in this case, narratives—must be held “to a demanding standard of ethical self-consciousness” by paying particular attention to how others—in this case, the participants—are portrayed through their stories (p. 271). Bolen and Adams (in press) state authors/researchers work to re/present those who do not have the ability to respond to the perceived representation. In storying these narratives and maintaining a commitment to the emergent truths from interviews, I aim to portray participants’ stories to readers in a manner both accurately and aesthetically.

Summary

Poulos (2013) reminds us the meaning we share through our stories is a core part of our personal identity and how we come to identify over time. In this chapter, I provided a detailed account of the interactive interview technique I engaged while speaking and sharing experiences with other military partners who have gone through a military deployment and reintegration. I worked through the process of storying the narratives, and I explained the importance of storying shared experiences to evoke a response from readers. Through

memory and narrative truth, I expressed the validity of stories shared by participants, as they are their personal re/collections of events within their relationships. I presented my procedure for my study as well as detailed demographic information on the 25 participants who shared their stories with me. I ended with my process of examining each interview transcription and choosing how to story the experiences of others. In the next chapter, Chapter 4, I ask you to read the participants' stories—the good and the bad—and experience, with them, the aftermaths of military deployment.

CHAPTER 4

NARRATIVES

She sits on the couch, staring blankly at the living room around her. Their tiny apartment a wreck, cluttered with sea bags, camouflage, and gear. The TV is on, but she barely hears it as she thinks about the months ahead. He is leaving, this time for real. For months they've been preparing—training for tomorrow and what lies ahead. Power of Attorney is in place and a will has been generated in case of the unimaginable. They're supposed to be ready—but she isn't.

He walks around, navigating his way through the combat zone that is currently their apartment, making small talk with her as he stuffs more and more gear into bags. Everything is going with him. She nods her head—not really listening to what he's saying, but instead thinking, what will communication be like? How will she know he's safe? How will he know if something happens to her? Is this the last time she sees him until he comes home? Is this the last time she sees him in this lifetime? How will her letters/care packages find him? Will the ship have email? How do they stay involved in each other's lives? Her biggest fear, what if there's nothing but silence? She keeps these questions to herself, afraid to add burden to him and scared to let the emotion run through her, fearful the dam will finally break and it will all come spilling out in a rush. All she can do is nod her head, hold back tears, and put on a façade of strength.

She knew this day was coming. She doesn't sleep that night. She's scared. She's anxious. She's ready to get it over with. She is already distancing herself—a coping mechanism to make goodbye easier. He is simultaneously trying to connect those last few moments together. She wishes she could reciprocate. But she must protect herself.

He tells her he loves her, they will be fine, and he will contact her as soon as he can. The dam starts to break. The tears begin to come as she hugs him for the last time. He closes the car door and grabs his bags. She feels emotions that are indescribable. The knot in her stomach is so big she becomes nauseous. She looks out the window, he turns back to blow her a kiss, and she leaves—pulling over a mile up the road to cry in the solitude of her car.

Communicating While Apart

Brittney. Email from my partner mid-March, one month before homecoming:

“First off, I am sorry for the way our conversation this morning (for me) ended. I hate cutting you off like that, and I'm sure it must be frustrating for you as well. I hope you know that I truly had to go, and that I wasn't just trying to avoid listening to how you feel.”

Apparently the internet goes down, delaying his email. Two weeks pass before I receive it. The conversation he refers to ends in a fight. I've been mad at him the entire time.

While communication is better than expected, I try not to have high expectations of him while he's away because I'm never quite sure where in the world he is. We have rarely spoken on the phone. Our emails to each other are long and detailed, recapping our days in hopes of keeping each other involved in our individual lives while apart. I don't hold anything back, but I am mindful of my tone. I feel like I should tell him if I'm having a rough day/week, but I don't want to bring him down. I decide emailing is beneficial for this dilemma, as I can simply backspace and re-type what I'm trying to say in a better tone—still telling him how I feel and what's going on, but keeping the email a happy message from home for him.

Emily. We are told as spouses you have to suck it up. You don't complain to them—don't tell them anything worrisome. Specifically, don't stress them out. It's hard because this is your other half and you should be able to lean on them when you need to, but when they're gone you can't and are encouraged not to.

Anne and Brittney. Sitting comfortably at home, our interview quickly resembles a conversation between two friends. I begin to move the conversation toward deployment.

“Can you tell me a little bit about the communication between the two of you during deployment,” I ask.

Laughing, Anne answers, “It was the best year of our marriage.”

“Why do you say that?” meeting her response with laughter of my own.

“Because he was on the phone, and he was hungry for the interaction. So he would stay on the phone, and we would talk about anything so that he could stay on the phone.”

Riley. I honestly feel like we talk more when he's gone because you remember to tell every detail of the day. You know?

Chloe. I had to comment on the fact I was not getting phone calls or I was not getting a message before he would understand I wanted/needed that communication while he was gone. I had to fight for it.

Elizabeth. When we would talk, it was a surface connection. It wasn't the real nuts and bolts of what was really going on in our lives. You don't want to share the challenges

that you are going through because it weighs on him and he needs to be focused on his mission. You want to be as upbeat as you can, and yet you're dying over here. It's all going to hell.

I felt insignificant. I felt like I was secondary to the military mission and then the military. Our lives were secondary to them.

Aubrey. Communication was difficult the first deployment because we weren't married and immediate family is given the communication preferences—not significant others. That was a challenge because I didn't really know what was going on. When we did talk, I kept it very positive from the home front, so he didn't have to worry. There is no sense in him worrying. I mean, what is he going to do?

But I think it made it easier in some ways. Not really communicating a whole lot makes the time go by faster. I didn't stop my life because he was gone.

Homecoming

Brittney. My alarm is set for 9:00 a.m., but I wake up long before then. Today is the day. Homecoming. I have been counting down to this day for the past month! I wouldn't allow myself to count down any sooner for fear of the time creeping by. Time is funny. How is it possible I have not seen him since August, yet eight months seemed to fly by? Almost a year has passed since we last saw each other, but I may as well have dropped him off last week. For months, I had been told, "homecoming will make it all worth it" and "you will never feel another feeling like it." They were right about that. The feelings I feel this morning are mixed. Of course I am excited, but I am also nervous, slightly scared, and incredibly unsure what to expect. Will he still look the same? More important, will he still be the same?

Sure we have communicated during the past eight months, but phone conversations were limited and people can be whomever they want via email. What will he think when he first sees me? Will I look the same to him? Or different?

There is no way I'm going to be able to wait for him to let me know when he is heading to shore. I am going to go ahead and make my way to the homecoming location. Leaving the apartment, a 700 square foot sanctuary that served as my comfort zone for the past eight months, I am fully aware the next time I come home, he will be with me. It's a perfect Southern California day: the sun is out, the high is 75 degrees, the wind is blowing from the ocean, and a slight note of salt can be detected in the air. I take the Chevy in order to accommodate all of the gear I assume will be coming back with him. I get in, roll the windows down, and head toward the ocean—hoping to catch a glimpse of the ship before I make my way onto the other side of base.

Madison. Homecoming is a very private thing. There is no better feeling than your spouse coming home. I didn't want anyone else to be there. I just wanted my moment with him. I have a friend who really wanted to come to our last one and I'm like, no. I lied to her so she wouldn't come. I told her I thought he was coming in at 1—total lie. He was coming at 10. I get to the airport though and there she is. I was fuming inside. I was so mad. She and a bunch of his coworkers were there, and I was kind of bummed because I wanted to see him. I didn't want to cry in front of everybody when I saw him and went to him for a hug.

Sophia. It's the morning of, and I'm stressed. I have nothing to wear! This is a big deal, a very special occasion, and I don't have one outfit! I immediately go to my sister-in-

law's house to get assistance. So many emotions...anxiety, worry, excitement. So much excitement! Excitement easily transferring to anxiety. Is he still going to like me? Am I going to like him? Is he the same? Will we still find each other attractive? Oh, but I'm so excited! What time is it? I have to go! I don't want to be late, and there could be traffic.

I'm so early...at least 4 hours early. This must be normal because there are so many people here! I am relieved to see so many women and children. But, so many of them have signs, some have balloons, and others have gifts. Am I a bad wife? I'm just here. Just me. I wait.

In my head, I had a super romantic, slow motion homecoming vision. I would see him, run to him, and he would passionately pick me up and embrace me longingly. That's not what happens. I see him. As we walk toward each other, the first words out of his mouth are, "where's the car?"

I stop, look at him and say, "I'm going to turn around, and we are going to do this again." This moment brings me back to reality. Why is this such a big deal? It's just me and him. I laugh, but it makes me mad. I feel every emotion possible.

I hold his hand the whole time. He and his buddies are exchanging stories. Relief, euphoria, and a wonderful feeling of relaxation come over me after eight long months. I have my partner back. I realize we are getting ready to leave, and the nerves come back. We are about to go home and be by ourselves, with potential for real adult intimacy. I'm nervous, and I think he is, too.

Emma. The excitement is overwhelming. I never get nervous. It's more like the butterflies when you're first dating feeling. Like, I get to see him soon! With our first

deployment, it being my first, I have to do everything right, you know? Reading any books or articles, or hearing stories from other spouses, you're like, okay I have to do something memorable. I've got to do it right.

Emily. There's so much building up to it. There's so much anticipation. What if it's awkward? What does it mean if it is awkward? Are we not as in love as we were? What would it mean? Now he's back, and it's easy and you're fine, right? I can't even tell people it's hard. It's not as easy as snapping your fingers and everything going back to normal because it doesn't.

Grace. He asked me to keep his homecoming very low key. Because I was away when he came back, we met up a week after he got home. He had time to sleep. He had time to unpack. He had time to decompress. It was one of the best things we could have done. By the time I was able to meet up with him, he was happy to see me. He wasn't stressed. He wasn't exhausted. He was less overwhelmed by the traffic. He was less overwhelmed by the crowds. That was a surreal day. I would love to say we were responsible after we met up, but no. We had a crazy night to ourselves and then went and saw the sights. It was great. It's forever sealed in my brain. There was no pressure.

I had to go back to complete my training afterward, then drove home cross country. When I finally got home, we went right to bed and crashed. Nothing intimate. Nothing fancy.

Olivia. When homecoming finally comes, my husband stays back with some of the troops while they turn their weapons in. I am slightly upset and disappointed, knowing he is

so close to me but I need to wait longer. But I know that is what he feels like he needs to do. When he walks across a ravine to the homecoming sight, we see each other and he starts running. And the *Chariots of Fire* music starts playing in my head. It's a moment I will never forget, and I am thankful I have it. It's better than my wedding day. I am nervous, I am elated, and I am also relieved. We did it! We conquered it. We survived. He is here, safe.

Isabella. When we hugged, it was like hugging a stranger. He went to kiss me, and I think he was looking for more of a romantic kiss. I was like, just a peck.

Ava. He decided to reenlist while he was gone the second time. We originally decided before he left we were getting out the next year. He changed his mind. You can't make that type of decision when you are thousands of miles apart. He would call at the most inopportune times—I would be driving or just getting off work. He would want my answer, and my answer was always, "I don't want you to reenlist." He would call again and ask me the same question. When my answer stayed the same, he would get mad and hang up. But he reenlisted anyway, about a week before he was supposed to be home.

I try to block that homecoming from my mind. I was nervous and scared. I was really glad to see him. At the same time, there was this bitterness in the back of my mind. So it was basically a "hey" and quick kiss, then he went to hang out with his buddies and completely blew me off. It made me feel like shit.

Hannah. I hang up the phone, my excitement building. I've just hung up with my husband, and he's told me a military shipment was coming. It's supposed to be here tonight,

and I have to be home so UPS will deliver it. He said it's something big, which is why UPS is delivering it separately...wonder what it is? I bet it's a rocking chair. He's always wanted one and you can shop real cheap over there.

Evening approaches, and I wait. I wait and wait and wait. No delivery. I need to let him know that it didn't come today. As I decide I'm giving up for the evening, there's a knock on the door. I cautiously walk to the door. Who would come to the house at this hour?

I open the door and to my surprise, there's a person standing there with wrapping paper wrapped all around them.

"Hello," I say. I have two small children asleep in this house, and I'm here alone. And there is somebody standing at my door in wrapping paper.

Silence.

"Hello," I say again, my anxiety building.

Silence.

I become uneasy. I look down. Hmm, those look like my husband's shoes. But he isn't here. He's halfway across the world. Great, an axe murderer in my husband's shoes!

"I'm not opening this door," I say forcefully as I back up. As I begin to shut it, one of our friends from church comes around the corner of the porch. Surprised, I stop.

"I think you need to open this present," he says.

I start to cry. I know exactly who it is. This is like one of those things you see on TV.

Mia. As homecoming came closer, I was nervous. The first time, I wasn't really sure how he would respond to me. Was he going to respond the same way to me? Is he going to hug me? It was our first year of marriage, so we really didn't get the chance to fully connect

as a married couple before he left. I was young and scared our first deployment. While he was gone, communication was so sporadic that fights could last two weeks. We would have a fight when he called, but then wouldn't be able to finish the fight until he was able to call again, which was almost always at least a week.

That being said, I think I was even more nervous the second time around, mainly because I was pregnant. When he left, I was six weeks along. When he came back, I was almost full term. That is a big body change, let alone life change. I was scared he wouldn't like me anymore.

Going Home Together

Brittney. It's slightly awkward on the ride home. For eight months, all of our communication occurs primarily through email, with limited opportunities to talk or see each other through Skype or FaceTime. Now we sit face to face. I almost don't know what to say. It's mainly small talk—commenting on each other's changed appearances, discussing our families, and asking how it feels to be back. The thought of intimacy almost terrifies me. My friends have teased me about how they won't see me for a few weeks (wink, wink). I assume it'll happen at some point during the day, but I'm nervous all the same. My thoughts keep circling back to it. Will he want to do it as soon as we walk in the door? God, I hope not. As weird as it sounds, I feel like I'm not quite ready. I know we've waited eight months, but I really feel like I need to talk to him for a little bit first, get to know him again.

He wants to take a shower when we first get home. I am relieved. The whole time he's in the bathroom, I sit on the couch wondering when *it* will happen. When *it* finally does, *it* is far from perfect. *It's* awkward, and I feel like *it's* our first time all over again.

Avery. The car ride home is weird. You can tell everybody is happy, but it's weird because we don't know what to talk about. We didn't really get to talk during the deployment at all. When we do get in the car, we're like, what do we do? What do we say?

"I'm glad you're home."

"Yep. I'm glad to be home, too."

That's pretty much all that's said. And, what are we eating? It's really quiet on the ride home.

Madison. He can do no wrong.

"You're perfect."

"I just want to stare at your face all day."

"Please don't sleep."

"Don't have jet lag."

"I miss your face."

"Wake up!"

"Hang out with me."

The first few days are intense. Like, love galore.

Emily. We just want to make out. That's all we want to do. We want to get in the car so we can be touching. Let's get home!

Mia and Brittney. Sitting at a coffee shop, I am pleasantly surprised at how well our interview is going. Although I have never met her personally before this encounter, Mia is opening up with me. We're both having a good time sharing our experiences.

“You’re in the car,” I say. “Tell me your thoughts as you’re driving home together for the first time in so long.

“Sex!” Mia screams, a little too loudly as a couple of heads turn in our direction. “You know, that was terrifying! I was on pins and needles for at least the first hour after we got to the house.”

“How long do you think it took to get back into that rhythm,” I ask.

Mia stops and thinks about it for a minute, “It was back to natural after a solid month. But you still try (to make it natural).” She blushes slightly at that last comment and moves on.

Hannah. He surprised me when he came home. I didn’t know he was coming home. He wanted to be intimate that first night. I asked, “Can we just have a hug night? I’m not ready for that type of thing.” And so that first night was a hug night, and I think that hurt his feelings a little bit. But I was shocked he was here in the first place because he wasn’t supposed to be here. I was happy for him to be home, but not ready for that.

Natalie. Intimacy was hard for me when he first came back. But having been married before, I had learned some things in my first marriage. Men use sex to connect with us, whereas we (women) use conversation. You know what? If I have to do some quickies when I don’t feel like it so I can talk to him, then that’s what I do. It’s kind of a joke with us now.

I would have been mortified to make that joke a few years ago. I would have thought that was a shallow marriage—you can’t just do that; let him use you like that. Yeah you can, because it’s different for them than it is for us. I know that’s the first thing on his mind when

he comes home, so we just get it done. Then I can talk to him. I used to think that wasn't okay and a sign of a weak marriage. But in our case it's not. It's okay.

Olivia. We planned a weekend getaway as soon as he got home. We got in the car, and I immediately felt like we had entered real life relationship mode. He wouldn't drive, which I thought was weird. I drove the entire weekend. Driving up to the mountains, there was no tension. We didn't fight. There was honeymoon bliss and anticipation, then the excitement hit. Sex wasn't that great. It was a little awkward. We had to practice being intimate again, so that was probably a letdown for both of us. I thought it was going to be this whole "whoa!" thing, but it wasn't.

Chloe and Brittney. We begin to move into the homecoming phase of the interview—describing homecoming and those first few days after the military member comes home. After Chloe finishes describing her various homecomings to me, I ask her about those first few days together, asking her if she feels like there is a honeymoon period when they're back together again.

"He didn't really have the excitement I had because he was gone working," Chloe answers. "I mean, I was working, too. But he's fighting a war."

"How did it make you feel when he didn't reciprocate your excitement?" I press, slightly surprised by her answer.

"Oh it was really, really painful, and disappointing, and just a huge letdown."

"I'm sure," I respond.

“Just like, I’m so excited and you just want to sleep,” Chloe continues. “I mean it’s not like I wanted to go have sex. I just wanted to see him, look at him with his eyes open, not while he was sleeping.”

“And just have that physical togetherness again,” I note, somewhat asking but more thinking out loud.

“Exactly.”

“Was establishing intimacy affected by him wanting to sleep?” I press further.

“Would it always take a couple of days to kind of work up to that?”

“Yes,” Chloe answers automatically. “Yeah, the first time he came home I remember, I thought, “oh, wow. We’re just going to go to the room and have sex,” and it wasn’t like that at all.

“And I was really surprised,” she continues. “That’s exactly what I thought and it’s not that.”

Anne. I was excited to see him. It was kind of like one of those moments as a kid when you waited for your birthday and then there is the reality of okay, well now it’s over. So it was fun, it was exciting. But I felt awkward in general. It was weird to feel awkward around my husband who I am married to and have kids with, but I did. When he would walk in the room there was awkwardness. It didn’t last for long, but it was there. It was unfamiliar to feel that way with my husband.

He spent a lot of that first day home going around and checking on things. And I felt like he was checking up to make sure I had done this or that correctly. I didn’t like it. I didn’t like it at all. It put me on edge.

Haley. I am always much more nervous for the after—once he gets home. The first time reintegration didn't go so well. So the second time I was more nervous because I didn't want to have a repeat of the first. It took us about seven months to get back in a routine the first time because we fought all the time. I didn't want that to happen again. I didn't want to have to go to counseling because the military isn't necessarily friendly to those who have marital issues. If you have marital issues, your command will hear about it and you'll get hell. It's a stigma you don't want.

A New Normal

Brittney. My daily schedule has changed drastically. I realize this as I'm beginning my 35 mile drive home, easily an hour and half at this time of the afternoon in traffic. I won't beat him home, so I pretty much can guarantee I won't get a workout in tonight. Damn it. That's four days in a row now.

Yup, traffic is terrible. I really don't feel like planning dinner tonight. I feel myself miss the simplicity of being by myself. What's wrong with me?! Why am I thinking things like this? I've been waiting for months for him to be home. I should be happy, right?

Olivia. My schedule became very flexible while he was gone. If the kids and I wanted to stay in our pajamas all day, we could. If we wanted to watch movies, we watched movies. If we wanted McDonald's for breakfast, that's what we did. And there was freedom in that. That really was a selfish positive to deployment. And it changed. It drastically changed when he got home, and it was probably one of the hardest things for me.

Madison. Little things will irk you. In the beginning, and for the whole time he's gone, I can't sleep. The bed is empty, and I hate it. I haven't slept in six months. And then he comes home and I'm like, "I'm not sleeping. You're taking up my space." I had been sleeping Spiderman style. I don't normally care which way the toilet paper goes on the roll as long as it's there. And then one day I find myself yelling at him, "toilet paper is supposed to come down the top, down the waterfall, okay?" Just random things—he is helping me put away laundry. That's a nice thing. He's helping me put away laundry. Then I'm like, "you're folding it wrong. That's a square, we do rectangles." And it's like, who am I?! That's not normal.

Mia. Finally, a little peace and quiet! I know I don't have long until he returns from his reintegration brief at the base, but until he does, I'm going to relish the moments being by myself again. I wonder if I have to time to watch a couple of the shows I've missed since he's been back. I really hate that he doesn't like the shows I've started watching. I'm trying not to take it personal, but yet I sure seem to be.

We've been together nonstop this whole first week. He constantly wants to hold my hand, pretty much never leaving my side when we're at home. And he's at home a lot. He pretty much only leaves to go to reintegration briefs, which last about an hour at the most. Then he's right back at home. I've noticed he keeps sitting closer and closer to me on the couch. I have missed the physical contact as well and I'm flattered, but geez! I kind of feel like I want him to leave again. This is not my schedule! I developed a solid, comfortable routine while he was gone, and now he is coming in and ruining it!

Sophia. I felt myself having a bit of an identity crisis. I became a different person once he got home in order to accommodate him. One hundred percent of my attention was directed toward him. I was very clingy. I quit my job and decided not to take summer classes to be there for him at all times. I stopped going to the gym. I stopped doing my own hobbies. I like to read in my spare time. I have favorite TV shows. I stopped it all. I just watched my shows later. I watched what I said and did, so as not to trigger any negative responses. When I found myself doing that, it bothered me for my own identity. I've always identified as a feminist—not a “we hate men” feminist, but a feminist all the same.

Ultimately, I think I became the more submissive partner out of guilt. I wasn't going to turn my back out of my own pride and tell myself I'm not a housewife. Why not just suck it up and cook dinner for three weeks straight and do the best you can?

Hannah. Right before he comes home, they give you a pamphlet on what to watch and be prepared for. They talk about how you become so independent, when your spouse comes back, you don't want to give up your independence. They say you're going to become so independent you're going to be offended when he come in and says, “That's the man's job. Do it this way.” You're going to say, “Buddy, I've been doing this for a whole year without you. Back off!” But I never feel that way. They tell me I'll feel that way, but I never feel that way. I am happy to give *it* away. I am happy not to be the only one making decisions all the time.

Lily. I change my routine to fit his schedule. Instead of doing whatever, whenever, I will do my routine after he goes to work. If I work out or hang out with other spouses, it will

be while he is gone at work. So it changes to accommodate his schedule so as not to avoid him.

Emily. I experienced more in those four months he was gone than I had the whole time I was there. It was awesome. Of course I missed him, but I loved it. I was so busy, and I was doing all these things. I was super active. I had that distraction. When he got home, there were so many things I wanted to share with him. I wanted to take him everywhere. There was this sushi place I was obsessed with, and I couldn't wait to share it with him. I knew he was going to love it. And he didn't love it. He was just like, "meh." We went on hikes I had been on, but they were different because it wasn't the same without my girlfriends. It was still fun, but it wasn't the same. Then I felt guilty. I'm blessed my husband is back and safe. We are together again, but I kind of felt like I was single (respectfully so) while he was gone...even though I was, am, married. I was living the life—hiking, eating at amazing restaurants, working out, reading books, and going to movies with my best friends. It was amazing. But at the same time, my husband was gone. I missed him. You're torn. I felt selfish, but in a good way, a healthy way.

Anne. I had a lot more flexibility. In some regards, I really got used to it. I got used to calling the shots—where we were going to go, when we were going to leave, and how long we were going to be there. I didn't really discuss it with him. I let him know, but he wasn't really weighing in because it wasn't affecting him, so it was kind of nice to have that autonomy. There were parts of him being gone I really liked.

Riley. My roles go from “I support my husband,” to “I’m head of the household,” back to, within a day, “I support my husband.” It’s lonelier when he comes home then I think it will be because I’m so social when he’s gone. That sounds awful to say, I’m lonelier when he’s here. But I see so many more people when he’s gone. A friend and I go see movies every Saturday morning and that kind of stuff when he’s not here. Whereas, when he’s here, we make dinner, put on a show, or whatever. And all those friends you make, you just kind of stop seeing until the next time he’s gone.

Grace. I feel the pressure after he gets home to be a housewife again. And for me, that’s very difficult because I’m used to being independent. I cook for myself. I clean for myself. I work out when I want. I go to bed when I want. If I want to stay up until midnight, no big deal. For me, it’s a big adjustment phase. Now there’s this other person I am responsible for. What does normal look like, and how can we do this again?

Reintegrating as a Couple

Brittney. Looking to establish something together, I decide it’s a good idea for the two of us to join a small group at the church we’re attending. On our way there, I contemplate calling it off and turning the car around. We are snappy with each other and moving toward an argument. But we go anyway because we committed.

The small group ends with both of us angry. As we leave, the group leader tells us he will pray for us. Embarrassed and beyond frustrated, I leave him behind me to storm to the car. When he joins me, I burst into tears, sobbing uncontrollably. I try to explain why I’m upset. Yet, nothing makes sense. I can’t quite pin down what’s wrong. I miss *my* friends, I miss *my* schedule, and in this moment, oddly, I miss being alone. We drive home in silence.

Claire. “Happy Thanksgiving!”

Well, I don’t know about happy. We haven’t been the same since he’s been back. We argue all the time. I feel so much resentment. Since he’s been home, all he does is complain. What could he possibly have to complain about? He didn’t have to stay here alone. He didn’t have to take on all of the responsibilities. He didn’t have to take care of our newborn baby. He didn’t have to work full time. He didn’t have to pay bills. Nothing fazes him anymore. He left a sentimental man and came back an asshole.

He walks into the room. I can tell something is up. He’s tense.

“What’s wrong?” I ask. He doesn’t say anything. He gets up, grabbing his keys.

“Where are you going?” I ask, more pressing this time. The baby starts to fuss.

Without turning, he mutters, “out.”

He’s never done this before. I feel my anger rising. “You know what? If you take those keys and ‘go out,’ you’re not coming back. Your stuff is going to be in the front yard.”

Our baby, now crying, adds chaos to an already nerve-racking scene.

“I’m not doing this with you,” I continue. “I’m not going to do the whole ‘I’m the guy who goes out because I’m ticked off.’ You learn to deal with it, and you talk to me. If you can’t talk to me, then we aren’t good. Because this isn’t going to work for me!”

I storm to the other room, inconsolably crying as I tend to our child who is now screaming. I listen, I hear the faint sound of keys being placed back on the table. He stays.

Haley. One of the biggest troubles for both of us was we got very used to communicating via media such as email and phone calls. The only time we were able to

effectively communicate when he got back was over the phone. We could talk on the phone and get along great, but face to face conversations risked getting into terrible fights. We were irritable with each other and very snappy.

Lily. Integrating him back in, especially from a combat deployment, was challenging. I didn't know what he had seen and been through. A particular struggle was his language use, the way he talked to me. He would treat me like one of his troops. He needed to know he was talking to his wife, not one of the guys. I had to really respond to him gently. I didn't want to distance myself too much, but I did have to watch what I said while he moved his mindset away from the warzone and back to the home front. He would react to the artillery rounds going off on base, and I would sit and watch. It was harder to get back into a routine because there was nothing I could do to help him adjust mentally.

It's frustrating. It's not as Hollywood portrays it all the time. There are moments where you're grateful they're back. Then there are moments when you're just frustrated. They come in and you feel yourself resisting them sometimes. He wouldn't do something the way I would. I would ask, "Why are you doing it wrong?" Friends and family think it's like the Hollywood homecomings they see on TV and in movies, so it became frustrating trying to talk to them about it. They didn't understand what he went through. Trying to explain it was too difficult. They think everything should be fine—it should all be good. But at points, it's not. It's not peachy-keen every day.

Olivia. We integrated fairly quickly as a family unit. We were concerned with our children and their transition. As a couple, it's been more difficult—we've struggled a bit more to reintegrate as a couple than as a family four unit.

Ava. Standing in the kitchen, I start lining up the day. I'm hoping we can do something fun together, seeing as we haven't exactly been compatible since he's been back. I just have so much bitterness inside me. How could he reenlist and not care that I didn't want him to at all? Why did he have to do it just five days before coming home? If he would've just waited a week, we could have talked about it and made the decision together. I could still leave. I don't know if I necessarily want to leave him, but I could go home and stay there until we figure something out. We haven't had one meaningful conversation since he's been home. We've had sex, but there's no passion. We basically both just want to get laid. Afterward, we roll over and fall asleep.

He walks into the kitchen, interrupting my thoughts, "Morning," he says.

I take a second to collect myself, put on the best smile I can, and turn around to reply, "Good morning! How are you?"

"Fine," he replies.

I work up the excitement as best I can to say, "I was thinking we could do something fun today. We really haven't gone anywhere since you've been home. How about going into the city?"

He pauses before answering. When he does, it's not what I want to hear, "I was actually thinking of going fishing today babe." He's not even looking at me.

"Then I'll go with you," I happily reply. "We haven't fished together in a long time!"

“I would really just like to go by myself. Maybe next time we can go together.”

Hurt, I begrudgingly agree, turning back to the kitchen sink. Within 15 minutes, he’s out the door, rod and reel in hand. I know he will be gone for hours. That’s how it’s been since he’s been home.

What’s wrong with me? Why doesn’t he want to spend time with me? Tears splash in the sink.

Emma. Once you get home, it’s overwhelming. He’s actually there with you. But it’s a readjustment. It’s more along the lines of, okay you’re back. How does this change things I’ve been maintaining the whole time? Mostly, I saw it in how we were with our dog.

“Are you mad I haven’t unpacked all those boxes downstairs that have been there since before you left?” I ask, quickly inviting his help, “So, are you going to help me unpack them?”

I would check in and coordinate with him before doing things, such as going to the gym after work, instead of just going like I did while he was gone. There was never really a power struggle. We talked openly before he even got home, so when he physically arrived, we were more mentally prepared.

Mia. He came back the first time a completely different man. I was much more cautious with how I communicated with him. I wasn’t as forthcoming with my opinions and emotions. I didn’t want to be *that* wife. You know, the one yelling at her husband all the time. I wouldn’t say anything, so it would be bottled up until I eventually exploded. I would bring things up from months ago.

The second time, I felt like reintegration needed to happen as soon as possible because we were about to be parents. We needed to mesh faster. When we didn't, I became really frustrated and stressed. I had so many emotions running through me. I actually chucked something at his head once because he made me so mad. I think that was one of our worst moments.

Madison. "You have to talk to someone," I say, carefully steadying my voice.

I try not to show how terrified I am. I know these night terrors aren't his fault. But last night, he jumped up and scaled our bedroom wall. While he was looking out the window, he repeated, "They're here. They're here. They're coming." The night before, he rolled over on top of me to "protect" me from a mortar round. At first, I was scared to death.

"You really have to talk to someone," I say again.

"It'll pass," nonchalantly laughing me off.

"You need to talk to someone," I repeat, more forcefully this time.

He shrugs as he leaves the room. I know he won't. If he talks to someone, it goes on his permanent record. It can affect his military career. But I can't handle this shit. It has literally been hell.

Grace. There was no translation—you can't communicate what's not being said. I wanted the guy I dated, the guy I married before he left. And he wasn't him anymore. So I had to readjust, and I didn't do a very good job those first few months. I was asking him for intimacy or affection, which he couldn't handle yet. I would quickly become irritated. I had

to learn to handle his frustration at the world. There were many fights. There were many tears. And we really struggled for about a year and a half.

Riley. The normal life he left was not the normal life to which he returned. I started working a full time job while he was gone. I had adjusted to my life, but he had not. He guilted me because now my job interfered with his work events. I couldn't go, I had to work. And I would throw that in his face.

He would say, "You're not going to be at this event that everyone is going to be at?"

And I would fire back, "Would you like to hear about the 20 events of mine you haven't attended this year that were really important to me?"

I'm probably the worst military wife ever for throwing it back in his face.

Avery. He wasn't used to all the communication. When he came home, he wasn't talking a lot. He wasn't communicating what he was going through. Or anything. So it made it hard to talk back and forth. But after awhile, I broke down. I told him, "I am too stressed, and I am freaking out. We have to do something different. If I'm going to be your wife and not a fellow troop, then I need you to talk to me."

And it was really hard for both of us because he forgot how to communicate with me. I was expecting him to be the same as he was before he left. We were talking about everything all the time.

Sarah. We would get annoyed with each other. He had a horrible routine while he was gone, so there was tension surrounding getting our routines back together. When he was

gone, I would only share the good stuff with him because you don't want them worrying while they're deployed. But when he got home, I started to share more things—not just good things...bad things, too.

When they come home, sometimes they forget you are their spouse, not one of their troops.

I remember saying, "You're not my commanding officer."

Isabella. Things were really up and down, honestly. We fought a lot at the beginning. I was scared I was going to get depressed because I didn't know how to deal with it. He went back to work, we weren't communicating, and I had the kids all by myself throughout the day.

Kaitlyn. It's hard. It's like you have a complete stranger moving into your house again. It's like starting over. It feels like you have to learn to communicate with the person all over again. He's a really quiet guy, anyway. So that makes it worse. I'm usually the one who runs the house, but I do want some kind of input from him.

Chloe. I had to relearn how to live with him all over again. He came back a completely different person each time.

Allison. In some ways, I think deployments are good for a marriage. My husband, in particular, is a definite believer in the whole "distance makes the heart grow fonder" thing. He gets very romantic while he's gone. He'll send romantic letters and cards, things like that.

Because you evolve and change through each deployment, it keeps the relationship new and fresh. In some ways, it feels as though you are meeting that person all over again. He's not a stranger, it's just different. It definitely has its ups and downs.

Anne. For me, I had to very consciously and intentionally hand things back over to him because I had been managing them. I was completely independent before he and I married, and I knew how all that worked. But he had taken over paying bills and taking care of the lawn. Once I got back into the routine of doing certain things he had always done, I didn't mind doing them. They were just part of it. But I knew he was going to want those things back, so I had to let them go.

Sophia. I think that was the hardest part. Because he was now at home, that's where he got a little annoying. You're not mad at him because he is doing something wrong. He's just...there. And there is no time for you.

Elizabeth and Brittney. I am moved by the level of emotion Elizabeth is choosing to share with me. Having just finished telling me about the depression her partner went through each time he returned from a deployment and her process for trying to draw him out, I decide to push a little deeper.

"How was it for you when he would be depressed?" I asked. "I know you would try to draw him out. How did you feel on the inside?"

"I felt alone and unloved," Elizabeth answers, matter of fact and bluntly. "That was my description to him. I was trying to help him understand where I was. I told him I just felt

alone and unloved, and after so many years of marriage it was a difficult thing to tell him. He didn't understand.

I quietly sit, feeling a pause filled with silence responses better than any words I could offer.

"He tried to explain to me," she continues. "He would say, 'It's not that I love you any less. It's not that I love the military more than I love you. It's what I do. It's who I am.' But for me, it still just felt like I was alone and unloved. And I felt secondary, I felt like an appendage that wasn't really wanted or needed. Not necessarily from him, but from the larger military machine."

With that, our conversation moves on.

Establishing a Routine

Brittney. A routine was hard to establish because there really was no routine the first month. He didn't work normal hours until about a month later, and even then he would go in at 8:00 a.m. and be home by noon. My work was trying to be supportive by letting me go home early on days I normally wouldn't. I was even excused from a mandatory work trip if I didn't want to go. While I was grateful to both organizations for their acknowledgements of our time spent apart, it somehow seemed to make it harder because we both knew this wasn't normal. It almost felt like reintegration was being forced on us instead of happening naturally. We both knew that in our normal life, even our normal life together, we wouldn't be spending that much time at home with each other. I was grateful when the excitement from outside parties finally wore off and things went back to normal. That helped us find our new normal.

Olivia. I feel like our situation was different than others. We had orders to move duty stations within three months of him being home, so that forced us to reintegrate quickly. Having two young children, moving, and trying to reintegrate all stacked up. It has been a struggle. I would honestly say we are just now starting to hit a comfortable routine one and a half years later. It took us until we got settled in our next duty station to feel like we could start really reintegrating.

Sophia. I wake up this morning feeling different. Contrary to the past two months, today I wake up thinking it's unrealistic for me to be a housewife. I want to find a job. I want to register for classes in the fall. It's time to renegotiate roles. Last night went okay. He didn't seem too shocked when I asked him to do the dishes while I walked the dog. I'm going to try again today.

I walk out of the bedroom and see him standing in the kitchen. I explain to him I really want to make breakfast, but if I do I would like for him to clean up afterward. There is an awkward pause, but he ultimately agrees and the morning goes off without a hitch. Perhaps it's finally time to start dividing up the work.

Looking back months later, that was the catalyst we needed. From that point on, we started splitting up the chores and have been in a routine ever since.

Elizabeth. Establishing a routine took time. It didn't happen overnight. It seemed like every time he deployed, it would get a little bit harder to establish a routine. He seemed to be more distant each time, creating a gulf between us in which we would have to build a bridge. A couple of times, I wasn't sure we were going to make it through the pain.

This past deployment, we started a gratitude journal when he came back. I decided that was how we were going to start our day, and instead of laughing me out of the room he hesitantly agreed to input. And it became very much a part of what we do, it has helped lift his sense of depression and allowed us to connect on a deeper level.

It took patience and awareness on my end. It's a daily effort. It's taken that sharing of gratitude, being grateful, writing it down, and then discussing those writings to make me realize how blessed we've been. It's a much deeper, richer relationship as a result of the challenges we have had to go through.

Haley. He got out of the military shortly after he returned from his second deployment. That affected our routine process because he had to focus on getting all of the paperwork processed, and, on top of that, we had to get ready to move. I think we're still working on a routine actually, almost two years later. There isn't really a support network outside of the military where we are now. What we've started doing is setting aside 30 to 40 minutes each day to sit down and talk to each other. Even if it's just about our day. It has greatly helped us with our communication and connection to each other.

Kaitlyn. We are falling apart. He's been gone too long and changed too much. A 15 month deployment and not enough time to reintegrate in between another deployment has taken its toll. We haven't seen each other, really seen each other, in months. I'm not sure what to do. He is struggling with PTSD, and it's bringing me down. Is this the end?

He walks into the room. I try not to tense up.

"We need to talk," he says.

Immediately, I become nervous, “Okay,” I reply.

“I’m circling the drain, and I don’t want to take you down with me,” he says. “You deserve better, and I can’t give that to you right now.”

I’m not sure how to reply. This is the end of our relationship, our marriage. He has given me an out. And I am thankful. I don’t have to feel guilty, do I?

Hannah. I really do think the whole year we were apart brought us closer together. I remember before he left and he would do things that irritated me. I would say things like, “when are you leaving?” He would be teasing me, and I would say things like that. I remember thinking it will be easier with him gone because I wouldn’t have to clean up his mess anymore. It can be messy if I want it to, but it will be my mess. I thought it would be easier in some ways. Then, when he left, I realized how much he did for our family. I appreciated how much he did that I took for granted.

Grace. We had to reestablish expectations at first. To some extent, we are still doing that a year and a half later. We fell back into a routine when we both went back to work. He did his own thing in the morning. I did my own thing in the morning. We went to work. We came home. I made dinner. Then we would sit in front of the TV and pick a show together. And that was how we started our reintegration. We found that by identifying through work, we were able to start talking again. We started trying to find things to do. By doing things physically together, we did much better than when we sat around and did nothing. We got more active, fishing or hiking or driving through the woods. He could relax. I could relax. There was no expectation on performance. We were able to laugh and joke together again.

In conquering that, we are tough as nails. I feel like we can handle just about anything.

Aubrey. It took us a month or two both times to hit a routine. The third time he came back, it wasn't just us reintegrating as a couple—we had a child, too. We went to counseling because we felt like we needed that extra layer of support. There wasn't really anything wrong, but I definitely needed more support than him because of some differences in parenting styles. He wasn't around for a little bit, so we had to transition from “it's just mom” to “it's mom *and* dad.”

Riley. I'm not sure we've established a routine, yet. He got back, and then we had the holidays. I'm not sure it feels normal, yet. And some of that may be because he leaves again next week. Honestly, I feel like I'm just waiting for the next time for him to leave. I don't have the “oh, he's home” mentality. I have the “two months until he leaves again” mentality.

Hindsight

Brittney. Ten pre-deployment classes are offered before he leaves—I attend all but one due to another commitment. Before he comes home, one class is offered for post-deployment and reintegration. This class is geared specifically to families with children. As a couple with no children, this class is worthless, and leaves me to figure out reintegration on my own. It would have been nice to have the same level of care, concern, and urgency placed on post-deployment as there was on pre-deployment.

Madison. The hardest part is people don't understand. I was/am so worried what other people were/are going to think—what they were/are going to expect. I was/am worried they would think something was wrong with our relationship. I think spouses need more resources before they get home. Even before the reintegration process. You need a warning because you're expecting roses, daisies, and nothing but honeymoon phases. Instead, oddly, things are just different. You should be warned. It's a lot of frustration. You find yourself just wanting a "normal" day.

Elizabeth. I was so naïve and unprepared for the military lifestyle. I keep thinking, God if I would have just had a senior wife come to me, take my hand, and say, "Let me tell you what it's going to be like. This is what this experience is and what you can expect. There is nothing wrong with you."

I would have just given my right arm for that...and I'm right handed. But there wasn't anyone. There was no one to help, and I felt very alone. I spent a lot of time in what I call "survival mode."

Riley. I'm starting more and more to understand how much people outside of this life don't get *it*. There is the classic list of things that piss military wives off. Nobody should say long distance is the same as deployment. Don't try to compare, and don't try to act like you know what this life is like. I could punch the next person in the face who says, "Communication is so much better than it used to be. Aren't you glad you aren't using snail mail?"

Claire. It makes me mad when I think about it because nobody told us what it was going to be like. Nobody offered any help. Nobody said it might be this way when he gets back, you might need counseling. No one.

Emily. I think there is definitely pressure put on us (military partners). I don't know if we do it to ourselves, or if society does it to us, or if the military wants us to be good so we are good. But, you feel misunderstood, and you feel like you can't talk about it with anyone because people view you as ungrateful. You should only be happy when he comes home, but there are a lot of emotions. It doesn't go back to the same. It's not the same. Of course you feel happiness, but that's not it. You also feel confused and lonely.

CHAPTER 5

DISCUSSION

Reintegrating after a military deployment is not easy. Contrary to popular belief, very few couples experience little to no conflict or frustration while readjusting to each other upon deployment's end. As I have previously discussed, reintegrating was the hardest part of being a military partner during my partner's time in the service. During our reintegration, I was told several times by many people how I would feel and how things were going to be when he came home. I had one person specifically, a male, tell me to not give my partner too much responsibility immediately once he got back so as not to stress him. The post-deployment class offered to military spouses I attended was geared to families with children. We did/do not have children. This class was not helpful. Too often, I was grouped into categories I did not fit. Too often, my experiences did not mirror what I was told was normal. A result of both, I was left feeling isolated and worried something was wrong with my relationship. As it turns out, I do not think I was as alone as I once felt.

In this final chapter, I begin by providing a brief summary of the first four chapters of my thesis. Second, I expound upon some initial interpretations of the narratives shared with me by participants of this study, and I reiterate the call for interpretive, narrative-based approaches in relational inquiry. I conclude this chapter with limitations of the current study, positioning them as possibilities for future scholarship utilizing the method I have forwarded here. Finally, I end my thesis with one last personal narrative.

Summary

I began my thesis with a look into my personal narrative as a military partner in Chapter 1. As I am arguing for a narrative approach to be incorporated in future inquiry, it

was important for my story to be included in my thesis. Sharing personal narrative also laid groundwork for proceeding chapters. In Chapter 2, I provided a brief literature review of current research pertaining to long distance relationships, followed by a thorough review of literature on military romantic partnerships as researched in the communication discipline. As I am ultimately arguing for a new method of inquiry pertaining to military couples and their deployment experiences, I concluded Chapter 2 with a brief overview of current research approaches and techniques, and I began my argument for embodying an interpretive, narrative inquiry approach.

In Chapter 3, I explained my reasoning for my method of choice. In my thesis, I incorporated an interpretive, narrative approach to show what military partners can experience in the aftermath of a military deployment. To engage with participants and share stories of our experiences together, I utilized reflexive, dyadic, interactive interviewing (Ellis & Berger, 2003; Ellis, Kiesinger, & Tillmann-Healy, 1997) to discuss the last two stages of the deployment process—deployment and post-deployment (also referred to as reintegration). Using a loose interview guide, together the participants and I talked our way through our experiences with military deployments. I recorded each interview, transcribed our conversations/discussions, and reviewed each transcription looking for unique experiences and embodied emotions.

Finally, in Chapter 4, I transformed the experiences from participants into short narratives and combined them with my own personal deployment experience. By utilizing both their stories and my own, I was able to engage in sensemaking through my personal narrative, draw readers in through participants' stories, and initiate an emotional response. Unlike most other studies regarding deployment/post-deployment within the military

community, using narrative accounts works to connect each participant with readers, and generates a stronger emotional response. Presenting experiences as stories makes them more relatable as well as provides a resource for current and future military partners living a similar experience. While emotions experienced by partners surrounding a deployment cycle can mirror each other, each military partner experiences different trials and tribulations that cannot be placed under a general relational umbrella—an umbrella that is expected to answer and “solve” the struggles that may be present for some, but not necessarily for others.

Interpretation of Narratives Shared

We have all seen them. Videos on YouTube or Facebook of homecomings—surprises at work or large sporting events, large homecomings at the homecoming site, even videos of pets’ reactions to their service member when they come home. These videos make us happy because the people within the video are happy—overwhelmed by a multitude of emotions when their military member comes home. As most participants in this study mentioned, homecoming is a wonderful day, filled with a wide array of emotions ranging from excitement and “butterflies in your stomach” to nervousness and anxiety. Because of how we, the outside world—readers, viewers, civilians—see homecoming and how it is portrayed through the media, we fail to look at what happens once homecoming ends. As Berle and Steele (2015) mention, as a society, we hold a romanticized view of military life based on what is depicted in various forms of media. What happens once two people, who have spent anywhere from six months to over a year apart, come back together to relate with each other on personal and proximally close levels again? We expect it to be seamless. We expect it to be nothing but happy—what we see on television or YouTube. How can they not be happy? He/she is home—everything must be alright.

Gergen (2009) mentions we are required by society to treat reality as a story. Because we think and process in story, in order for our reality to seem believable and real, we must portray it as story in which others can draw meaning from. However, what happens when our reality does not create the story others want to hear? According to Gergen (2009), such stories holds no merit. Military partners' realities do not always create the happy homecoming stories we have all come to know and expect. Instead, most stories show relational struggles (some harder than others), frustration, and, in some cases, the dissolution of the relationship. How do we make these stories important? As Bochner (2000) discusses, the purpose of narrative is to "extract meaning from experience rather than to depict experiences as it was lived" (p. 270). We have to be willing to allow military partners the space in which to share their myriad of stories. In order for the military lifestyle/culture to become less taboo, we must make meaning from the experience. As military partners share their stories, the emotion and vulnerability embedded within their stories leads to increased understanding and relationally empathic response from others.

One participant asked a most pointed question: "What does normal look like, and how can we do this again?" What does normal look like? Who determines what normal is? Is normal what society deems as normal, or is normal specific to each subculture within society? Normal tends to carry a similar definition as truth, and truth exists only "when our language accurately depicts the world" (Gergen, 2009, p. 6). Returning to normal does not mean returning back to how things were before deployment. Finding a new normal means establishing a routine and feeling a sense of connection and stability again within the relationship. As Gergen (2009) stresses, "central to any ongoing relationship is the existence of a shared reality" (p. 32). Reality is different for military couples. Realities shift and change

quite frequently and relational partners create their own unique reality while apart. Once reunited, each military couple must work to make a shared reality again. This process, as shown in the narratives shared here, can be daunting and frustrating. While some military couples seem to return to a shared reality effortlessly, other couples do not.

Within the narratives, several participants described how they felt their military members changed while away on deployment and the effects those changes had on their reintegration process upon the end of deployment. Several participants eluded to relational struggles. However, I write the narratives in a messy text structure (Marcus, 1994). By doing so, I ask readers to come to their own conclusions from the narratives shared. While there are pseudonyms given to each participant within the study, the narratives are structured as such to encourage readers to draw their own conclusions. Again, as Marcus (1994) notes, leaving an “open-endedness” or “incompleteness” (p. 567) to the text allows for varied positions and responses to be gathered. In true postmodern style, I do not offer the conclusions of each participant’s story to the reader. I leave their stories open to create a space for readers to come to their own conclusions and offer further discussion as well as stir emotions within readers as they relate to participants’ stories. Because the truth of a story only exists between storytellers and readers/listeners (Bochner, 2012), offering no set conclusions renders possible an engagement between both participants and readers as they continue their conversations through their narratives. The task of the author is not to necessarily “get it right about the nature of the world, but to generate understandings that may open new paths to action” (Gergen, 2009, p. 81). As participants work to make sense of their experiences over time (Bochner, 2000) through interactive interviewing, readers also engage in sensemaking exercises based on the stories participants share.

All 25 participants identified as female, therefore all the stories come from a female point of view. As mentioned in Chapter 2, approximately 85% of active duty military personnel are men. Therefore, the vast majority of military partners are statistically likely to identify as female. While the participants for this study would seem to make up a majority of military partners in the current military setting, it is important to note that any dependent, regardless of gender, could experience similar narratives during the post-deployment and reintegration period. Several narratives from participants hint at their need to accommodate the military member and his schedule. Because of the structure of the military, and dependents being viewed as no more than dependents of the military member, this could be true for any military partner, regardless of gender. The military member is contractually bound to do what is needed and asked of him or her by their branch of service. Dependents, in a sense, must follow. As such, being a dependent outranks your gender identification. The person left behind is the person who accommodates.

The stories shared by military partners serve to offer a lens into the lives of military couples, particularly partners during post-deployment and reintegration. Through interactive interviewing, each participant, along with myself, discussed and worked their way through their unique experience as a dependent of the armed services. Each story shared served to offer different viewpoints into a subculture under the greater interpersonal romantic relationship umbrella. Military relationships rarely have the opportunity to mirror their civilian counterparts. With military partnerships making up significantly less of the romantic relationships than what we would call “normal” relationships, it is important to explore the narratives of those military partners who are willing to share a glimpse of what their relationship is like when their significant other is a member of the armed services. While

each military partner experiences his or her own unique relationship stressors, present and future military partners can learn from the stories shared of past and present partners.

As several narratives indicate, nobody tells military partners what it will be like when their military members come home. There is a large amount of ambiguity as to what to expect, both relationally and personally, sometimes leading to unmet expectations and frustrations. The best resources available for military partners are military partners who have experienced similar situations and can help others to learn and grow from their experiences. Narrative scholars would agree—we gather their experiences through story. As Bochner (2012) concludes, “there may be no better way to come to terms with how we want to live and what we can understand and say about how others live than to listen to and converse with their stories” (p. 162). Engaging in narrative approaches to relational inquiry continues to support further expansion of scholarship into a fast growing area of communication research. Not only does it broaden the field of communication in the relational world, but it allows those experiencing similar situations to relate to others and firmly say, I am not alone.

Limitations of Research

No research is, in both conventional and postmodern senses, free of limitation. Throughout my work on this thesis, I encountered emergent limitations. First, there was a drastic difference in the number of interviews conducted through some form of computer mediated communication (Skype or FaceTime) as opposed to face to face interviews. In future inquiry utilizing this method, it would be beneficial to experience more interview encounters through face to face interaction as opposed to computer mediated communication. While technological advancements have, without a doubt, afforded scholars new ways of making connections through various outlets, face to face interactions continue to provide

stronger emotional connection between interviewers and interviewees through nonverbal cues, which remain largely altered or absent in computer mediated forms of communication. Although I feel as I was able to witness and participate in stories and connection, I contend future lines of inquiry would benefit from conducting the majority of interviews face to face, as there is more relational possibility, freedom, and ability to create stronger and deeper connections—all leading to more evocative engagement.

Second, while I do not believe this detracted from the importance of this work or affected the narratives of this particular project, participants were solicited from any branch of military service where they experienced a deployment. Through my conversations with participants, I learned different branches of the military have different policies and practices as to how each respective branch treats post-deployment preparation. Each branch appears to use different methods with both military members and their partners. It follows that it could be beneficial to focus on studying one branch of service and, subsequently, purposefully recruiting participants for this reason.

Third, Ellis, Kiesinger, and Tillmann-Healy (1997) and Ellis and Berger (2003) stress the importance of the researcher/interviewer having some type of knowledge and connection to the phenomenon being discussed and examined so the interview exchange can be personally beneficial. Although I shared commonalities with those I interviewed, there were still times I found it difficult to ask certain questions or push further into a participant's response. In particular, I felt this struggle at the beginning of the interview process. As a former military partner, this personally surprised me. I have, ostensibly, shared similar experiences through my own deployment. A clearly stated premise ungirding interactive interviewing is the blurring of lines between interviewer and interviewee as both become

participants developing an emotional connection. Nonetheless, there were times I felt some hesitancy to ask certain questions, which could inhibit trust and openness and influence the vulnerability of the narratives we shared with each other. As the interview process continued, this hesitancy gradually became less and less pronounced. However, needing knowledge or first-hand experience within the culture can create a limitation for future inquiry by those who are not familiar with the military lifestyle.

Finally—“Where is the data? Where are the numbers?” The data is within the stories—the stories are, in a sense, the data. I could have done survey-based research comprised of several measurements utilizing Likert scales and multiple choice questions, collecting hundreds of questionnaires from military partners. I could have consolidated the data from those surveys and provided generalizable statistics and numbers. I could have selected common themes within each narrative and presented the themes as generalizable sets of data, using grounded theory (Charmaz, 2008) or relational dialectics theory (Baxter, 2011) as my foundation for results and data. However, Coles (1989) stresses we cannot properly illuminate experiences with theory, but we can through story. The goal of my thesis is not to discover the answer or solution for the relational, communication struggles accompanying deployment—that is impossible. Instead, my goal has always been to cast light on and increase understanding of a particularly trying experience. The stories and experiences shared about struggles with deployment and reintegration find validity in others and are as influential as numbers and statistics, if not more so.

I am drawn to postmodern approaches to relational inquiry, in part because they allow for the possibility of no ending or conclusion to be drawn. Again, as Ellis and Bochner (2000) note, stories work only in ways that can be used instead of analyzed, told time and

time again instead of theorized and ended, and used as a method to offer further conversation. Therefore, instead of presenting data in an aggregated format, I chose to let each story/experience stand for itself in order for readers to draw their own conclusions based on their responses while reading. Because each relationship is different, and each person within the relationship is different, it is almost impossible to present the narrative data as a generalized experience meant to capture the full range of human emotion for each individual participant. Allowing stories to stand as data promotes future inquiry from a narrative lens as a way to increase resources and awareness for current military partners as well as incite further conversation.

Future Possibilities

Future research can include a variety of different components, such as only interviewing participants from the same branch of service as well as conducting strictly face to face interviews. However, extending current inquiry to continue to include personal narratives expands the possibilities for future inquiry within the field of communication on the military community beyond the current study. Inquiry can be expanded to include parties in addition to those partners left behind. Utilizing an interpretive, narrative approach through interactive interviewing practices enables and encourages researchers to creatively develop and advance new ways to actively interact with postmodernism and narrative based approaches to relational inquiry. One way to further utilize this method would be to interview both military partners within the relationship, not just one or the other. From personal experience, my partner and I have different memories of the deployment and reintegration process. Future inquiry should seek to gather the stories of both parties to construct mediated

co-constructed narratives (Ellis & Bochner, 1992) and extend conversation further for both dependents of the military and members of the armed services.

Second, as I noted in Chapter 2, the deployment cycle typically occurs in three stages: pre-deployment, deployment, and post-deployment. In this study, I focused primarily on the latter two stages of the deployment cycle, interviewing multiple people who have experienced these stages. Both Ellis, Kiesinger and Tillmann-Healy (1997) and Kiesinger (1998) suggest multiple encounters with smaller numbers of participants experiencing similar life events to more effectively channel and engage in interactive interviewing. The goal is to build a relationship between interviewer and interviewee, and, as a result of the interviews becoming more intimate over time, create narratives together that enhance understanding. In my study, I interviewed 25 participants and met with each participant once. In the future, it would be beneficial to meet with a smaller group of military partners multiple times throughout the entirety of the deployment cycle—from pre-deployment (when orders are given and work ups begin) through post-deployment (when the relationship finds a new normal and routine). Engaging in this method allows for more in-depth conversation and can produce more insight into the military lifestyle and the sacrifices made by the partners of military members as dependents of the military. Of course, this method is more “emotionally demanding and time consuming” (Ellis, Kiesinger, & Tillmann-Healy, 1997, p. 143), but by engaging in this method those outside the military may be able to come to a greater understanding as to what military life is like for those so deeply involved and affected.

Conclusion

In the end, the main goal of this study is to argue a postmodern, narrative approach to future interpersonal relational inquiry within the field of communication. While this thesis

may serve to inform civilians of the trials and tribulations of deployment for military partners, I also seek to expand current inquiry toward a postmodernism informed interpretative, narrative approach. Through story, I hope to create an enhanced understanding of military romantic relationships and their unique experiences. Homecomings are wonderful, but there is more that happens after the banners come down and partners go home together for the first time in months. On the outside, we seldom see the tensions, struggles, and conflicts that can be a part of military members and their partners' everyday lives. We see the video, we offer our support and excitement when they return, and then we go on about our own daily lives, leaving those directly involved to figure out reintegration on their own.

This is a relational study showing the effects a deployment can have on relationships within the military from the military partner's point of view. In this study, I have strived to expand current inquiry in the field of communication within the military community by including personal experiences by partners who have lived through these moments, made it through the frustration, and can now offer their unique experience to further the conversation and provide resources to future military partners experiencing deployment. What better way to relate and make sense of an experience than by sharing stories with others? Like Bochner, Ellis, and Tillmann-Healy (2000) mention, to be in a relationship is to be in a story, and as a result, to want to tell your story to others. Military partners have stories to tell—stories that can differ significantly from our common narratives in society. These differences can create a perceived binary between military and civilian partners. In order to blur the lines, narratives must be told. They must be discovered, uncovered, storied, and used to work toward new

understanding. Through understanding, we can make sense of situations. Through story, we can learn.

Sitting in the airport, I notice a feeling of excitement. I've been at a convention for work in Las Vegas for five days. I realize how ready I am to be home. Relief spreads over me—I'm ready to be home! That is exactly how I feel. Not only am I ready to be home, but I'm ready and wanting to see him. Maybe it's because this time, I am the one who left. Boarding begins, and I shoot a quick text to my partner, "Boarding now. See you in a bit! Love you!"

My flight lands an hour later. I check my phone, and my partner is about 5 minutes away. I'm so happy that he was able to get off work to come pick me up as opposed to me having to take the train. I step out into the beautiful California sunshine, feeling like myself for the first time in about four weeks. A couple of minutes later, I see a Nissan Altima turn the corner and get in the passenger pick up line. I start walking that way. When I get to the car, my partner gets out to help me with my luggage.

"Hey, how was your flight?" he greets me with a kiss.

"Nothing out of the ordinary, which is always good," I respond.

He smiles as he picks up my bag and loads it into the trunk. A few seconds later, we are heading toward the freeway. Heading home, ready to begin the next chapter. For the first time in four weeks, no what-ifs or worries run through my mind. A new beginning. A new chapter. A new normal.

REFERENCES

- Ashbury, E. T., & Martin, D. (2012). Military deployment and the spouse left behind. *The Family Journal: Counseling and Therapy for Couples and Families*, 20(1), 45-50. doi: 10.1177/1066480711429433
- Baxter, L. A. (2011). *Voicing relationships: A dialogic perspective*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Berle, D., & Steel, Z. (2015). Families of returned defense force personnel: A changing landscape of challenges. *Australasian Psychiatry*, 23(4), 399-402. doi: 10.1177/1039856215590031
- Bochner, A. P. (2000). Criteria against ourselves. *Qualitative Inquiry*, 6(2), 266-272. doi: 10.1177/107780040000600209
- Bochner, A. P. (2007). Notes toward an ethics of memory in autoethnographic inquiry. In N. K. Denzin & M. D. Giardina (Eds.), *Ethical futures in qualitative research: Decolonizing the politics of knowledge* (pp. 197-208). Walnut Creek, CA: Left Coast Press.
- Bochner, A. P. (2012). On first-person narrative scholarship: Autoethnography as acts of meaning. *Narrative Inquiry*, 22(1), 155-164. doi: 10.1075/ni.22.1.10boc
- Bochner, A. P. (2014). *Coming to narrative: A personal history of paradigm change in the human sciences*. Walnut Creek, CA: Left Coast Press.
- Bochner, A. P., Ellis, C., & Tillmann-Healy, L. M. (1998). Mucking around looking for truth. In B. M. Montgomery & L. A. Baxter (Eds.), *Dialectical approaches to studying personal relationships* (pp. 41-62). Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.

- Bochner, A. P., Ellis, C., & Tillmann-Healy, L. M. (2000). Relationships as stories: Accounts, storied lives, evocative narratives. In K. Dindia & S. Duck (Eds.), *Communication and personal relationships* (pp. 13-29). Hoboken, NJ: Wiley Blackwell.
- Bolen, D. M., & Adams, T. E. (in press). Narrative ethics. In I. Goodson, A. Antikainen, P. Sikes, & M. Andrews (Eds.), *The Routledge international handbook on narrative and life history*. New York, NY: Routledge.
- Brody, N. (2013). Absence—and mediated communication—makes the heart grow fonder: Clarifying the predictors of satisfaction and commitment in long-distance friendships. *Communication Research Reports*, 30(4), 323-332. doi: 10.1080/08824096.2013.837388
- Brooks, J. (2016). Texas military families are learning more about dealing with deployments and ways to continue to cope when loved ones return home. Retrieved February 2016 from <http://www.dailyjournal.net>
- Carter, S. P., & Renshaw, K. D. (2015). Spousal communication during military deployments: A review. *Journal of Family Issues*, 1-24. doi: 10.1177/0192513X14567956
- Charmaz, K. (2008). Grounded theory as an emergent method. In S. N. Hesse-Biber & P. Leavy (Eds.), *Handbook of emergent methods* (pp. 155-170). New York, NY: Guilford Press
- Coles, R. (1989). *The call of stories: Teaching and the moral imagination*. Boston, MA: Houghton Mifflin.

- Cramer, E. M., Tenzek, K. E., & Allen, M. (2015). Spirituality, social support, and the communicative role of the chaplain in veteran populations. In E. S. Parcell & L. M. Webb (Eds.), *A communication perspective on the military* (pp. 81-99). New York, NY: Peter Lang.
- Dainton, M., & Aylor, B. (2002). Patterns of communication channel use in the maintenance of long-distance relationships. *Communication Research Reports*, 19(2), 118-129.
doi: 10.1080/08824090209384839
- Drummet, A. R., Coleman, M., & Cable, S. (2003). Military families under stress: Implications for family life education. *Family Relations*, 52(3), 279-287. Retrieved from: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3700279>
- Ellis, C. (1997). Evocative autoethnography: Writing emotionally about our lives. In W. G. Tierney & Y. S. Lincoln (Eds.), *Re-framing the narrative voice* (pp. 115-139). Albany, NY: State University of New York Press.
- Ellis, C. (2009). *Revisions*. Walnut Creek, CA: Left Coast Press.
- Ellis, C., & Berger, L. (2003). Their story/my story/our story: Including the researcher's experience in interview research. In J. F. Gubrium & J. A. Holstein (Eds.), *Postmodern interviewing* (pp. 157-183). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Ellis, C., & Bochner, A. P. (1992). Telling and performing personal stories: The constraints of choice on abortion. In C. Ellis & M. G. Flaherty (Eds.), *Investigating subjectivity: Research on lived experience* (pp. 79-101). Newbury Park, CA: Sage.
- Ellis, C., & Bochner, A. P. (2000). Autoethnography, personal narrative, reflexivity: Researchers as subject. In N. K. Denzin & Y. S. Lincoln (Eds.), *Handbook of qualitative research* (2nd ed., pp. 733-768). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

- Ellis, C., Kiesinger, C. E., & Tillmann-Healy, L. M. (1997). Interactive interviewing: Talking about emotional experiences. In R. Hertz (Ed.), *Reflexivity and voice* (pp. 119-149). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Ezzy, D. (2010). Qualitative interviewing as an embodied emotional performance. *Qualitative Inquiry*, 16(3), 163-170. doi: 10.1177/1077800409351970
- Faber, A. J., Willerton, E., Clymer, S. R., MacDermid, S. M., & Weiss, H. M. (2008). Ambiguous absence, ambiguous presence: A qualitative study of military reserve families in wartime. *Journal of Family Psychology*, 22(2), 222-230. doi: 10.1037/0893-3200.22.2.222
- Fisher, W. R. (1984). Narration as a human communication paradigm: The case of public moral argument. *Communication Monographs*, 51(1), 1-22. doi: 10.1080/03637758409390180
- Fontana, A., & Frey, J. H. (2000). The interview: From structured questions to negotiated text. In N. K. Denzin & Y. S. Lincoln (Eds.), *Handbook of qualitative research* (2nd ed., pp. 645-672). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Frisby, B. N., Byrnes, K., Mansson, D. H., Booth-Butterfield, M., & Birmingham, M. K. (2011). Topic avoidance, everyday talk, and stress in romantic military and non-military couples. *Communications Studies*, 62(3), 241-257. doi:10.1080/10510974.2011.553982
- Gergen, K. J. (2009). *An invitation to social construction* (2nd ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

- Giorgio, G. A. (2013). Reflections on writing through memory in autoethnography. In S. H. Jones, T. E. Adams, & C. Ellis (Eds.), *Handbook of autoethnography* (pp. 406-424). Walnut Creek, CA: Left Coast Press.
- High, A. C., Jennings-Kelsall, V., Solomon, D. H., & Marshall, A. D. (2015). Military families online: Seeking and providing support through internet discussion boards. In E. S. Parcell & L. M. Webb (Eds.), *A communication perspective on the military* (pp. 101-120). New York, NY: Peter Lang.
- Janesick, V. J. (2014). Oral history interviewing: Issues and Possibilities. In P. Leavy (Ed.), *The Oxford handbook of qualitative research* (pp. 300-314). New York, NY: Oxford University Press.
- Jordan, K. (2011). Counselors helping service veterans re-enter their couple relationship after combat and military services: A comprehensive overview. *The Family Journal of Counseling and Therapy for Couples and Families*, 19(3), 263-272. doi: 10.1177/1066480711406689
- Joseph, A. L., & Afifi, T. D. (2010). Military wives' stressful disclosures to their deployed husbands: The role of protective buffering. *Journal of Applied Communication Research*, 38(4), 412-434. doi: 10.1080/00909882.2010.513997
- Karakurt, G., Christiansen, A. T., Wadsworth, S. M. M., & Weiss, H. M. (2012). Romantic relationships following wartime deployment. *Journal of Family Issues*, 34(11), 1427-1451. doi: 10.1177/0192513X12470799

- Karney, B. R., & Crown, J. S. (2011). Does deployment keep military marriages together or apart? Evidence from Afghanistan and Iraq. In S. M. Wadsworth & D. Riggs (Eds.), *Risk and resilience in U.S. military families* (pp. 23-45). doi: 10.1007/978-1-4419-7064-0_2
- Kiesinger, C. E. (1998). From interview to story: Writing Abbie's life. *Qualitative Inquiry*, 4(1), 71-95. doi: 10.1177/107780049800400105
- Knobloch, L. K., Ebata, A. T., McGlaughlin, T. C., & Ogolsky, B. (2013). Depressive symptoms, relational turbulence, and the reintegration difficulty of military couples following wartime deployment. *Health Communication*, 28(8), 754-766. doi: 10.1080/10410236.2013.800440
- Knobloch, L. K., Ebata, A. T., McGlaughlin, P. C., & Theiss, J. A. (2013). Generalized anxiety and relational uncertainty as predictors of topic avoidance during reintegration following military deployment. *Communication Monographs*, 80(4), 452-477. doi: 10.1080/03637751.2013.828159
- Knobloch, L. K., & Theiss, J. A. (2012). Experiences of U.S. military couples during the post-deployment transition: Applying the relational turbulence model. *Journal of Social and Personal Relationships*, 29(4), 423-450. doi: 10.1177/0265407511431186
- Knobloch, L. K., Theiss, J. A., Wehrman, E. C. (2015). Communication of military couples during deployment: Topic avoidance and relational uncertainty. In E. S. Parcell & L. M. Webb (Eds.), *A communication perspective on the military* (pp. 39-58). New York, NY: Peter Lang.
- Laslett, B., & Rapoport, R. (1975). Collaborative interviewing and interactive research. *Journal of Marriage and the Family*, 37(4), 968-977. doi: 10.2307/350846

- LeBlanc, S. S., & Olson, L. N. (2015). Communication identity: The impact of veterans' identity negotiation on family communication. In E. S. Parcell & L. M. Webb (Eds.), *A communication perspective on the military* (pp. 139-158). New York, NY: Peter Lang.
- Leeds-Hurwitz, W. (1995). Introducing social approaches. In W. Leeds-Hurwitz (Ed.), *Social approaches to communication* (pp. 3-20). New York, NY: Guilford Press.
- Maguire, K. C. (2015). Military family communication: A review and synthesis of the research related to wartime deployment. In E. S. Parcell & L. M. Webb (Eds.), *A communication perspective on the military* (pp. 19-37). New York, NY: Peter Lang.
- Maguire, K. C., Heinemann-LaFavre, D., & Sahlstein, E. (2013). "To be connected, yet not at all": Relational presence, absence, and maintenance in the context of a wartime deployment. *Western Journal of Communication*, 77(3), 249-271. doi: 10.1080/10570314.2012.757797
- Marcus, G. E. (1994). What comes (just) after "post"? The case of ethnography. In N. K. Denzin & Y. S. Lincoln (Eds.), *Handbook of qualitative research* (pp. 563-574). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage
- Marini, C. M., Wadsworth, S. M., Christ, S. L., & Franks, M. M. (2015). Emotion expression, avoidance and psychological health during reintegration: A dyadic analysis of actor and partner associations within a sample of military couples. *Journal of Social and Personal Relationships*, 1-22. doi: 10.1177/0265407515621180
- Mehta, M. S., & Jorgenson, J. (2015). Work-family predicaments of Air Force wives: A sensemaking perspective. In E. S. Parcell & L. M. Webb (Eds.), *A communication perspective on the military* (pp. 121-138). New York, NY: Peter Lang.

- Merolla, A. (2010). Relational maintenance during military deployment: Perspectives of wives of deployed U.S. soldiers. *Journal of Applied Communication Research*, 38(1), 4-26. doi: 10.1080/00909880903483557
- Nichols, L. O., Martindale-Adams, J., Graney, M. J., Zuber, J., & Burns, R. (2013). Easing reintegration: Telephone support groups for spouses of returning Iraq and Afghanistan service members. *Health Communication*, 28(8), 676-777. doi: 10.1080/10410236.2013.800439
- Padden, D. L., Connors, R. A., & Agazio, J. G. (2011). Stress, coping, and well-being in military spouses during deployment separation. *Western Journal of Nursing Research*, 33(2), 347-267. doi: 10.1177/0193945910371319
- Parcell, E. S., & Maguire, K. C. (2014a). Comfort, cliques, and clashes: Family readiness groups as dilemmatic sites of relating during wartime. *Journal of Social and Personal Relationships*, 31(4), 497-515. doi: 10.1177/0265407514521766
- Parcell, E. S., & Maguire, K. C. (2014b). Turning points and trajectories in military deployment. *Journal of Family Communication*, 14(2), 129-148. doi: 10.1080/15268431.2013.864293
- Phillips, D. C. (1990). Postpositivistic science: Myths and realities. In E. G. Guba (Ed.), *The paradigm dialog* (pp. 31-45). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Pistole, M. C., Roberts, A., & Chapman, M. L. (2010). Attachment, relationship maintenance, and stress in long distance and geographically close romantic relationships. *Journal of Social and Personal Relationships*, 27(4), 535-552. doi: 10.1177/0265407510363427

- Poulos, C. N. (2013). Writing my way through: Memory, autoethnography, identity, hope. In S. H. Jones, T. E. Adams, & C. Ellis (Eds.), *Handbook of autoethnography* (pp. 465-477). Walnut Creek, CA: Left Coast Press.
- Profile of the military community. (2013). Retrieved from:
<http://download.militaryonesource.mil>
- Rossetto, K. R. (2015). Evaluations of supportive and unsupportive responses during spousal deployment. *Communication Monographs*, 82(3), 291-314. doi:
10.1080/03637751.2014.978344
- Sahlstein, E. (2004). Relating at a distance: Negotiating being together and being apart in long-distance relationships. *Journal of Social and Public Relationships*, 21(5), 689-710. doi: 10.1177/0265407504046115
- Sahlstein, E. (2006). Making plans: Praxis strategies for negotiating uncertainty-certainty in long-distance relationships. *Western Journal of Communication*, 70(2), 147-165. doi:
10.1080/10570310600710042
- Sahlstein, E., Maguire, K. C., & Timmerman, L. (2009). Contradictions and praxis contextualized by wartime deployment: Wives' perspectives revealed through relational dialectics. *Communication Monographs*, 76(4), 421-442. doi:
10.1080/03637750903300239
- Stafford, L. (2010). Geographic distance and communication during courtship. *Communication Research*, 37(2), 275-297. doi: 10.1177/0093650209356390
- Stafford, L., & Merolla, A. J. (2007). Idealization, reunions, and stability in long-distance dating relationships. *Journal of Social and Personal Relationships*, 24(1), 37-54. doi:
10.1177/0265407507072578

- Stafford, L., Merolla, A. J., & Castle, J. D. (2006). When long-distance dating partners become geographically close. *Journal of Social and Personal Relationships*, 23(6), 901-919. doi: 10.1177/0265407506070472
- Stewart, J. (1995). Philosophical features of social approaches to interpersonal communication. In W. Leeds-Hurwitz (Ed.), *Social approaches to communication* (pp. 23-45). New York, NY: Guilford Press.
- Theiss, J. A., & Knobloch, L. K. (2011). Relational turbulence and the post-deployment transition: Self, partner, and relationship focused turbulence. *Communication Research*, 41(1), 27-51. doi: 10.1177/0093650211429285
- Tretheway, A. (1997). Resistance, identity, and empowerment: A postmodern feminist analysis of clients in a human service organization. *Communication Monographs*, 64(4), 281-301. doi: 10.1080/03637759709376425
- Villagran, M., Canzona, M. R., & Ledford, C. J. W. (2013). The milspouse battle rhythm: Communicating resilience throughout the deployment cycle. *Health Communication*, 28(8), 778-788. doi: 10.1080/10410236.2013.800441
- Weiner, A. S. B., & Hannum, J. W. (2012). Differences in the quantity of social support between geographically close and long-distance friendships. *Journal of Social and Personal Relationships*, 30(5), 662-672. doi: 10.1177/0265407512465997

Appendix A



**IF YOU HAVE EXPERIENCED A DEPLOYMENT AS A PARTNER OF
SOMEONE IN THE ARMED SERVICES, WE WANT TO HEAR FROM YOU!**

SHARE YOUR STORY!

Interviews to be conducted **Jan. 4 - Feb. 29**

Time and Location will be decided based on availability

(FaceTime/Skype is an option if distance is a factor)

Length of interview will be approximately 30-60 minutes

Each session will be recorded via digital recorder to be used in a study regarding communication during reintegration following military deployments.

Only information about your age, gender, length of partnership, and number of military deployments will be used in this study.

To Volunteer, contact [REDACTED]

Appendix B

Interview Schedule

Introduction— 5 minutes

I want to thank you for volunteering and choosing to meet with me. My name is Brittney Miller, and I am a Communication Graduate student at Angelo State University. Today we are going to discuss the reintegration process upon return from a military deployment. As a former military spouse myself, I want to hear about your experiences in regards to reunion and reintegration from the standpoint of the person who is left at home during a long term separation. I encourage you to discuss your experience with me in as much detail as possible. Remember, this project is completely voluntary and you may choose to end the discussion at any time. I will be recording our conversation with a digital recording. Your identity will remain confidential, with only myself having access to your identifying information to connect you to your comments. Only your stories will be noted in the study. Lastly, if you wish to know the results of the study, all information will be available August 15.

Questioning Route— 30-50 minutes

1. Tell me about the communication between you and your partner during the deployment.
 - A. How did the frequency of communication affect the deployment process for you?
2. Tell me about your routine you had established for yourself (and children if applicable) during the deployment.
3. Explain your emotions to me as homecoming and reunion drew closer.
 - A. Did you express your emotions to your partner? Why or why not?
 - B. *If you have done multiple deployments, how did the emotions change in preparation for homecoming from the first deployment to the most recent?
4. Were there any classes offered for partners regarding reintegration?
 - A. (if no) Would you have attended if they would have been offered?
 - B. (if yes) How were these classes helpful to you?
5. Tell me about the emotions you felt when seeing your partner for the first time after the deployment.
6. What were your feelings as you both went home together?
7. Tell me about the first few days back together again immediately following homecoming.

8. After a week passed, tell me about the adjustment of your routine upon your partner's homecoming.

A. If you had children, tell me about your mindset in regards to reintegrating the parent into the routine as opposed to your spouse.

B. Explain the importance for you personally regarding reintegration as a couple (was this more or less important to you than reintegrating your partner with the children?).

9. Tell me about the communication after the first few days home from deployment.

A. Explain the struggles that occurred.

B. Did you feel like you changed the way you communicated to your partner during the first few weeks home than what you normally would have? Why?

10. Did you feel like there were people you could discuss your feelings with in regards to any frustrations you experienced?

11. *Comparing multiple deployments, how did the reintegration process differ between the first deployment and the most recent deployment?

12. Tell me about establishing a routine together as a couple again.

A. Did the frequency of communication during the deployment itself affect the routine process?

B. How long did it take for you to feel like there was a routine re-established?

**question may not apply to all participants as some may not have experience multiple deployments*

Conclusion— 5 minutes

Thank you so much for your time and answers. I truly appreciate your participation. Do you have any final comments or questions for me? Remember, if you are interested in the final results, all results will be available by August 15. Thank you again for your participation and your help!

Appendix C

Angelo State University Institutional Review Board (IRB)

Consent to Participate in an IRB-Approved Research Event

Project Title: When the Honeymoon Phase Ends: Navigating Renegotiation within Romantic Relationships after Military Deployment

Investigator Name/Department: Brittney Miller & Dr. Derek M. Bolen/Department of Communication and Mass Media

Investigator Phone: [REDACTED]

You are being asked to participate in a research event conducted with the approval of the Angelo State University Institutional Review Board (and if applicable, other relevant IRB committees). In order to participate, you are required to give your consent by reading and signing this document.

The investigator will explain to you in detail the purpose of the project, the procedures to be used, and the potential benefits and possible risks of participation. You may ask any questions you have at any time before the project begins. A basic explanation of the project is written below. Please read and, should you decide to participate, sign this form in the presence of the person who explained the project to you. Upon request, you will be given an unsigned copy of this form for your records.

Refusal to participate in this study will have no effect on any future services you may be entitled to from the University. Anyone who agrees to participate in this study is free to withdraw from the study at any time without penalty. I understand also that it is not possible to identify all potential risks in an experimental procedure, and I believe that reasonable safeguards have been taken to minimize both the known and potential but unknown risks.

1. Nature and Purpose of the Project

The nature of this project is to explore communication practices that occur during the deployment cycle, particularly focusing on post-deployment and reintegration. The study will seek to learn about post-deployment communication practices—including how the person left at home feels about the adjustment upon the deployed partner's return and the re-adjustment back into everyday life together.

2. Explanation of Procedures.

Participation in this research is voluntary, and there is no compensation for participating in this study. No negative treatment or ramification will be assigned should you refuse to participate or discontinue your participation with the study. Together, we will discuss the deployment and reintegration process and the communication during the first few weeks after being reunited with your partner. The interview will last between 30-60 minutes. This session will be recorded by a digital recorder. After the interview, the discussions will be transcribed personally. Portions of transcribed narratives will appear in the final study using a pseudonym to protect your identity. The completed report will be available to view on August 15.

3. Discomfort and Risks.

The possible risks from participating in this study are minimal. These risks are not greater than those ordinarily encountered in daily life. If you feel uncomfortable, you have the right to stop the interview at any time with no consequences. Any participant who suffers extreme psychological trauma as a result of the interview will be directed to Military One Source at 1-800-342-9647.

4. Benefits.

The study will expand current communication research regarding military couples and the reintegration process after a deployment. Most of the current research does not take personal stories into account, eliminating the ability to examine multiple types of communication occurring within relationships. Not only will the study broaden the communication discipline, it will provide resources to military couples who have also experienced the challenges of a deployment.

5. Confidentiality.

Participants will not be named or identified in the study. Other than general information regarding age, gender, length of partnership, and number of deployments experienced, no other identifying information will be divulged in the study. Transcriptions of the discussion will be made from the digital recordings. All materials relating to demographic information and transcription notes will be kept under lock and key. They will be disposed of properly upon the completion of the study. This will happen no later than a year after completion of the study. Any data on paper from the study will be shredded in a paper shredder, electronic files will be deleted, and audio recording will be erased. The principle investigator will have sole access to this information. At all times, strict confidentiality will be a primary concern during the study.

The dated approval stamp on this consent form indicates that this project has been reviewed and approved by the Angelo State University Institutional Review Board (IRB) for the protection of human subjects in research and research related activities.


Any questions regarding the conduct of the project, questions pertaining to your rights as a research subject, or research-related injury should be brought to the attention of the IRB administrator, Dr. Tay Hack (tay@angelo.edu) TEL: (325) 942-2068, ext. 6121.

Any question about the conduct of this research project should be brought to the attention of the investigator as listed on this form.

Participant Signature

Date

Witness Signature

Date ASU IRB# BOL-100615
THIS PROJECT HAS BEEN
REVIEWED AND APPROVED BY
THE ANGELO STATE UNIVERSITY
INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD (IRB)

Chair, IRB
10/6/15
Date